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Autor: Ribi, Rolf

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Voters back Federal Council and parliament

On 26 November, the Swiss electorate approved two moves proposed by their government and parliament – overwhelmingly in the case of national minimums for child benefit, and narrowly in support of controversial new legislation to pay CHF 1 billion to the new members of the European Union.

"Yes" to aid for the east

As expected, the referendum on cooperation with Eastern European countries was a close call: Only 53.4 percent of voters and 15 cantons approved the new Federal Law on Eastern Europe (BG Ost) in a poll initiated by the SVP and two small right-wing parties. The cantons of western Switzerland and the urban regions of German-speaking Switzerland voted clearly in favour of the act, while the rural regions of central and eastern Switzerland opposed it just as strongly. The largest proportion of "Yes" votes was recorded in Vaud (61.5 percent), Basel City (60.5), Geneva and Jura (both 60.1). The new legislation was rejected most vehemently in the cantons of Glarus (64.6), Ticino (62.9), Schwyz (61.3) and Thurgau (56.7). A cantonal majority was not required, but would have been achieved. The approval rate was slightly lower than that of the 2005 EU referendum on the Schengen and Dublin Accords and the free movement of people. The losers were the SVP, who had almost singlehandedly opposed the new act. Indeed, it is the third time in a row that the party has failed to win a poll on Europe. Endorsement of the BG Ost means Switzerland can now

continue to build on its bilateral relations with the EU.

"Yes" to new family policy

A clear 68 percent of voters approved the Federal Child Benefit Act. All cantons except Appenzell-Innerrhoden endorsed it, most overwhelmingly in the cantons of Jura (83.7 percent), Ticino and Fribourg (both 75.8), Vaud (75.6) and Basel City (70.6). Turnout was 44.4 percent. The referendum was initiated by the Swiss Trade Association. The outcome was also a blow to the Swiss Employers' Association, the SVP and the FDP. The winners were the SP, the CVP, the Greens and the trade unions. The new federal act lays down national minimums for child benefit and support for adolescents in vocational training, and creates uniform qualification conditions. It will increase family allowances in a total of 22 cantons. One million children and adolescents currently receive family allowances. The private sector's contribution towards these benefit payments will increase by CHF 455 million from its present level of CHF 4 billion. So now there is even less scope for any new familyrelated demands.

"Yes" votes by canton for aid for the East and on child benefit: 60.5% 70.6% 60.5% 70.6% 60.5% 70.6% 60.5%

Comment: Yes and yes

It was an important referendum. Approval of the federal law on cooperation with the states of eastern Europe means Switzerland can continue pursuing its current European policies. Bilateral relations with the European Union are in the long-term interests of the Swiss people and backed by the Swiss business sector. But once again we have witnessed how precarious these bilateral relations can be. A 53 percent approval rate for a bill on Europe is a narrow margin, and could well be overturned by future referenda. Yet Switzerland depends on having good neighbourly relations with Brussels, whether for adapting or ratifying existing agreements or for new accords. As early as next year, the Federal Council and Swiss parliament's European policies will be under debate again, this time over extending the free movement of people to include Romania and Bulgaria. In addition, the people could still reach a more fundamental decision about the freedom of movement of people from European Union Member States. It was therefore wise to provide CHF 1 billion in targeted development aid to the ten youngest members of the EU. Referenda for improvements to family policies have an easy time in Switzerland. More than two out of every three voters and nearly all the cantons endorsed the federal bill on family allowances. Families will now receive monthly child benefit of at least CHF 200, and CHF 250 per year per adolescent in vocational training. All parents qualify, whether they work fullor part-time - even (under certain circumstances) if they don't work at all. The slight increase in allowances will be especially welcomed by lower-income families. Approximately CHF 5000 a year for a family of four is no pittance. But money for children and young people in training is one thing; improving the lot of those juggling families with work is quite another. Left-wing parties and the CVP are now calling for nationwide family policies. Having pushed through national regulations on maternity leave, the wish list includes more all-day schools and crèches. Will it then be Christmas all year? ROLF RIBI