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Banning minarets and the export of weapons?

Two popular initiatives aim to ban the construction of minarets and the export of war materials. A referendum will be held on the proposals on 29 November. The use of jet-fuel duty for air traffic will also be voted on. By René Lenzin

The Swiss weapons industry achieved record exports of war materials last year, totalling over CHF 720 million. The biggest customer was Pakistan, which purchased CHF 110 million worth of weapons from Switzerland. While manufacturers and their employees are delighted, opponents of such exports are furious. Switzerland is following the global armament trend, according to the Group for a Switzerland without an Army (GSoA). It believes exports to Pakistan, in particular, are irresponsible.

GSoA feels vindicated in its desire to ban the export of war materials. In September 2007, it submitted a popular initiative with this objective. The initiative also aims to stop the transfer of and trade in weapons. And it calls for the Swiss government to support international efforts aimed at disarmament and arms control. The initiative is backed by the Social Democrats and the Greens.

However, the Federal Council and the conservative parties oppose the proposal. They believe that current export controls strike a balance between various interest groups. They maintain that export licences are in line with the objectives of Swiss foreign policy, on the one hand, and the inter-

ests of national security and the economy, on the other. The Federal Council and a parliamentary majority argue that approval of the popular initiative would jeopardise the survival of the Swiss arms industry and put national defence at risk as a result. The National Council rejected the initiative by 131 votes to 63, and the Council of States by 35 votes to 7.

Are minarets part of religious freedom?

The "Against the construction of minarets" popular initiative was submitted in July 2008. It aims to introduce a complete ban on the building of new minarets in Switzerland. The initiative committee argues that the minaret has no religious significance as an architectural structure, but is instead a symbol of a religious-political claim to power that contradicts Switzerland's constitution and legal system. The initiative's proponents, who are supported in Parliament by the Swiss People's Party (SVP), say a ban on minarets would not affect religious freedom.

The other major parties, and the Federal Council, oppose the initiative. They say it goes against many of Switzerland's principles enshrined in the Federal Constitution,

such as the principle of equality under the law, the freedom of religion and conscience, the ownership guarantee, the principle of proportionality and the requirement of compliance with international law. They also argue that a ban would represent a disproportionate intervention into cantonal responsibilities. They maintain local authorities are best placed to approve or ban minarets based on the applicable building and planning laws. The National Council rejected the initiative by 132 votes to 51, and the Council of States by 39 votes to 3.

Jet-fuel duty to go towards air traffic?

Federal government levies a jet-fuel duty on private domestic flights. As international commercial flights are exempt from this duty owing to international agreements, the income generated is low (below CHF 50 million). Until now, half has gone to the federal treasury and half to road transport. The Federal Council and Parliament have now agreed a constitutional amendment under which 50% of jet-fuel duty would be used for air traffic. The aim is to finance contributions to environmental protection and safety measures. The National Council approved the proposal by 124 votes to 63, and the Council of States by 33 votes to 7. Only the Social Democrats and the Greens rejected the proposal.

All three referendum proposals concern the constitution. They therefore require the approval of the people and the cantons.

More money for invalidity insurance. The Swiss people approve a tax increase for invalidity insurance and abolish the general popular initiative. By René Lenzin

The reorganisation of invalidity insurance (IV), which has chronic deficits, has taken another step forward. The electorate has approved a fixed-term increase in VAT. From 2011, a 0.4% rise in VAT, or around CHF 1.1 billion, will flow into the invalidity insurance fund's coffers for a period of seven years. Together with substantive reforms, these extra funds should ensure the financial stability of invalidity insurance and reduce its deficits. Invalidity insurance will also receive

initial capital of CHF 5 billion from the old-age and survivors' insurance fund.

With a turnout of just over 41%, 54.5% of voters approved the proposal. However, it almost failed to secure a cantonal majority – 12 cantons voted in favour, and 11 against. The tax increase received most support in French-speaking Switzerland, Ticino, Grisons and the urban parts of German-speaking Switzerland. It was rejected in the rural cantons of central and eastern Switzerland.

Following its introduction in 2003

67.9% of the electorate and all cantons have now voted in favour of abolishing the general popular initiative. This new democratic instrument was enshrined in the constitution in 2003. It was intended to enable initiative committees to present political issues as general proposals instead of formulating constitutional amendments. However, when it came to implementing the instrument, the Federal Council and Parliament came to the conclusion that the new popular right was too complicated in practice. It will now be removed from the constitution.