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The party funding debate heats up with elections looming

The parties on the left as well as various experts and international organisations are calling for greater transparency in the funding of parties and electoral campaigns. All such proposals have previously been rejected by a parliamentary majority. However, popular initiatives are now set to help make the breakthrough. By René Lenzin

"The most expensive election campaign of all time" read the headlines of Swiss newspapers at the start of the year as several parties revealed their budgets for the federal elections this autumn. The Christian Democrats (CVP) indicated a sum of three million Swiss francs, three times higher than at the last elections in 2007. For the Free Democrat-Liberals (FDP) the figure was 2.6 million Swiss francs, which has since become over three million. "Eight million Swiss francs would be required for a high-profile campaign", said Vincenzo Pedrazzini, FDP campaign chief, with five million as the absolute minimum. However, these figures only cover the budgets of the national parties. In addition, there is the expenditure of their cantonal sections and the individual candidates.

No-one knows exactly how much the parties will spend in total. For the 2007 elections, experts put the total election campaign costs at around 50 million Swiss francs. They anticipate the figure will at least double this year, but Switzerland is still a long way off US levels where hundreds of millions of US dollars are spent on the presidential election campaign alone. Yet the cost of political marketing is constantly increasing in Switzerland too and with it the call for greater transparency over funding sources. Political donations are another area in which Switzerland fails to meet international standards on disclosure.

Only the parliamentary group contributions are disclosed

The parties are unable to fund election and referendum campaigns with membership contributions as they bring too little money into the coffers. This also applies to the Social Democrats (SP) and the Greens, which depend more heavily on these sources of income than the conservative parties. They therefore require their representatives in re-

munerated government posts and on the National Council and Council of States to make contributions to party funds. All parties are primarily reliant on donations for their campaigning. However, the origin of this money remains largely unknown as disclosure is not mandatory. The only area in which there is a degree of transparency relates to state contributions to the parliamentary groups in the councils at federal level. Each group with at least five seats on the National Council or Council of States receives an annual basic contribution of 144,500 Swiss francs plus an additional 26,800 Swiss francs per member. In total, this funding recently increased from just under 5 million Swiss francs to around 7.3 million per year.

In recent years, various attempts have been made, mainly by the left-wing parties and the Greens, to introduce greater transparency to party funding. They have called for parties and referendum committees to have to disclose the source of their donations above a certain amount, or for those who reveal the names of their donors to be rewarded with state funding. Another appeal is for parliamentarians to disclose their personal financial position. The supporters of these proposals are annoyed, in particular, at donations from the business world, which are generally only made to the conservative parties. The SP and Greens claim this allows powerful lobby groups, such as the banks and pharmaceutical industry, to wield improper influence over politics.

They are also concerned about the financial might of the Swiss People's Party (SVP). Critics complain that it has three times more funding available for the elections than all the other parties put together – money that is invested in campaigning by extremely wealthy SVP members. This information cannot be verified as the SVP does not grant any inspection of its campaign accounts. But

it must have had funding available for referendum campaigns such as the minaret and expulsion initiatives on a scale that only the powerful *Economiesuisse*, the umbrella association representing the Swiss economy, could otherwise muster.

Proponents of the disclosure obligation argue that greater transparency is essential to ensure a functioning democracy. They say that the electorate would only have sufficient information to form its opinion if it knew where the money for campaigns came from. The call for transparency is often coupled with the desire for state party funding, a system familiar to many western countries. The differences in donation revenues are balanced out through public contributions, increasing equal opportunities in terms of political competition.

However, it is precisely such state contributions that the opponents of greater trans-



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Photo: Kyrnos

parency use as their main argument. They claim that a disclosure obligation would not only infringe upon the privacy of donors and result in a decrease in contributions but would also inevitably lead to state support of the parties, which is not compatible with the established Swiss principle of having part-time politicians (*Milizprinzip*). Even though there are certainly critics within the conservative camp of the lack of transparency, all previous attempts to shed more light on party funding have been blocked on the basis of this argument.

International criticism

International bodies regularly criticise Switzerland over the lack of transparency on party funding. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the non-governmental organisation Transparency International warn that this is

exposing Switzerland to the suspicion of corruption. But is the Swiss political system really corrupt? The problem is "that this question cannot be answered owing to a lack of transparency", says Martina Caroni, Professor of Public Law at the University of Lucerne. She does not believe that Swiss politics is corrupt, rather that it is open to influence. This is resulting in a loss of basic confidence in a functional system. "The feeling of not being able to trust politicians because they are open to influence is widespread among the electorate", explains Caroni.

The recently elected Federal Councillor, Simonetta Sommaruga (SP), also seems to have recognised a need for action. She is responsible for such matters as Minister of Justice. As a parliamentarian, she has always supported her party's call for greater transparency. However, the Federal Council as a whole has so far opposed a disclosure obligation. Sommaruga is therefore adopting a cautious approach and has started by commissioning a report comparing foreign party funding models.

Two committees, which plan to call for transparency through popular initiatives, are making more rapid progress. Firstly, there is that of 31-year-old SVP National Councillor Lukas Reimann, who intended to oblige all parliamentarians to declare their incomes and gifts. Under pressure from his party, which has so far refused any transparency, Reimann is now limiting his proposal to additional income and gifts relating to the political mandate. But as a representative of the Facebook generation, he is standing by the fundamental call for greater transparency. He is also receiving support from other youth parties.

Secondly, SP National Councillors Andreas Gross and Andi Tschümperlin have launched a host of initiative projects. They want to present the people with several variants to increase the chances of referendum success. A minimum variant provides for a disclosure obligation for donations above a certain amount. A second variant would supplement this obligation with an upper donation limit for individuals and companies. The third variant is based on incentives and rewards parties and committees with state contributions if they disclose the source of their donations. Finally, the fourth variant proposes state party funding; parties that disclose their accounts and have at least one

seat on the National Council would receive one or two Swiss francs a year per vote. Gross and Tschümperlin are hoping to have set up a cross-party committee, revised the wording of the initiative and launched the collection of signatures by late summer.

Money is not everything

The intentions of the two Social Democrats are clear. They want to highlight the issues that they consider a problem, namely a lack of transparency and the excessive financial power of the SVP, at the height of the electoral campaign. The SVP is in fact setting a high benchmark and forcing the other parties to increase their budgets. That even includes the Greens, who plan to spend three to four times more on this year's election campaign than in 2007. However, at 100,000 to 200,000 Swiss francs, the budget of this national party is still very modest.

The recent successes enjoyed by the Greens as well as the Green Liberals show that money is not everything in politics. The parties that win elections are those that give the right answers at the right time or are simply in vogue. Referenda such as those on the custody and statute-of-limitation initiatives show that political success cannot simply be bought. Both proposals were launched by citizens' committees that had neither significant financial resources nor professional structures, but whose issues were clearly in tune with the times.

However, money can, of course, make the difference between victory and defeat, particularly where referendum results are tight. And while it will not determine general trends in elections, it can at least tip the balance. "If we had the SVP's budget, we could win two to three percent more of the vote", says Ueli Leuenberger, President of the Greens. Alongside the Social Democrats, he now at least wants to ensure that the electorate knows where the SVP's funding comes from. If the planned popular initiatives materialise, the electorate will decide for itself whether this is something that it does indeed want to know.