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The intelligence service, old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV) and the green economy

Security is at the heart of three proposals at the popular vote to be held on 25 September – national security, social security and securing the natural environment.

JÜRG MÜLLER

Albeit in three different areas, the three proposals deal with fundamental security issues. How far should or must the state go to identify and avert threats to national security? What funds should be used to ensure a good old-age pension? And how should we manage our economy in future to safeguard the natural environment, protect resources and reduce environmental pollution? Behind such questions lie the new Intelligence Service Act, the “AHV plus” popular initiative and the “Green economy” popular initiative, which will be put to the vote on 25 September.

Bolstering the intelligence service

The Federal Intelligence Service (FIS) is also to be permitted to infiltrate computers, listen in to telephone calls and bug private property in future, according to the new Intelligence Service Act. This governs the duties but also the limits on and control of the FIS. It provides for new measures for obtaining information – such as monitoring the postal and telecommunications systems – in the fields of terrorism, illegal intelligence activities and attacks on critical infrastructure. The FIS is subject to four-fold control by the bodies of Parliament, the administration and the Federal Council. “The fundamental rights and individual freedom of Swiss citizens are protected by the new law and the sphere of privacy remains untouched as far as possible,” maintains the Swiss government. The law also ensures a “strengthening of



How far should the state go in surveillance of suspicious persons? This is one of the issues to be decided upon by the Swiss people in September.

Photo: Keystone

internal and external security appropriate to the threat situation”.

The majority of MPs share this view. Some left-wing politicians nevertheless voiced criticism of the proposal during consultations. Paul Rechsteiner, the SP Council of States member from St. Gallen, declared that Switzerland is facing a fundamental decision about whether to provide the FIS with all means of surveillance. An “alliance against the snooping state” – consisting primarily of small, left-wing parties and youth parties – called the referendum against the Intelligence Service Act. Opponents point to the end of privacy: “Everyone is under surveillance, not just criminals as is often claimed. Mass surveillance can be carried out through the tapping of telephone calls, reading of emails, Facebook, WhatsApp and SMS messages as well as the monitoring of the

internet through keyword searches regardless of whether there is cause for suspicion,” they contend. The Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland and the cantonal police authorities are already responsible for investigating terrorist activities and organised crime, and that is sufficient, they say.

The Social Democrats officially support the referendum and therefore oppose the law. It is noteworthy that resistance is also emerging in some conservative circles and in the business community. Above all, criticism has been voiced by the IT and telecommunications sectors.

10 % more old-age and survivors' insurance (AHV)?

The popular initiative “AHV plus”, launched by the Swiss Federation of

Trade Unions, calls for a 10 % increase in AHV pensions. Each single person would receive CHF 200 more a month and each married couple CHF 350 more. Those behind the initiative are seeking to give state old-age pension and survivors' insurance (AHV) more weight in relation to the pension funds. They argue that the pension fund benefits will continue to decrease in future. Reductions of up to 20 % are not uncommon owing to the financial market crisis. "Pension losses need to be rebalanced. The most effective and economical way of achieving this is by increasing AHV pensions by 10 %. This issue is even more pressing because AHV pensions have not risen significantly for decades and increasingly lag behind wage trends the more time goes on," write the initiative's authors on their homepage.

An increase of 10 % in pensions would see AHV expenditure climb by four billion Swiss francs a year. The initiative does not reveal how the pension increase would be funded. SP National Councillor Silvia Schenker does not see money as an issue. The pension increase "would cost the employer and employee 0.4 % of salary each", she says. That is feasible because salary contributions have not risen for 40 years. Conservative politicians take a different view. Urs Schwaller, a former CVP Council of States member from Fribourg, declared that the pension increase called for is "simply not financially viable". The funding of old-age pensions is a major challenge even without this initiative, he says.

The Federal Council does not believe there is any financial leeway for increasing AHV benefits. It stands by its "old-age pension 2020" reform project. This is currently undergoing parliamentary consultation. This is a comprehensive package that contains the following points: the same pension age of 65 for men and women,

flexible structuring of pensions, reduction in the minimum conversion rate in occupational pensions and additional funding of the AHV by increasing VAT.

One planet instead of three...

The Greens are raising a topic that is central to them with their "for a green economy" initiative. The popular initiative seeks to reduce Switzerland's environmental footprint to a sustainable level of one planet by 2050. If the whole world behaved like Switzerland, three planets would be needed. The authors believe switching to a green economy would tackle environmental issues, such as climate change, rainforest clearance and

Swiss economy is already green enough. He warns against "senseless and excessive regulation". The Federal Council also rejects the initiative but put forward an indirect counter-proposal because it at least supports the general thrust. It tabled an amendment to the Environmental Protection Act with the aim of protecting resources and using them more efficiently. Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard used similar wording to the Greens during the parliamentary debate: "We must move from a throw-away society towards a circular economy." Switzerland produces the greatest amount of refuse per capita in Europe, she said. However, the Federal Councillor's warning went unheeded. Even an amendment to the Environ-

The "for a green economy" initiative aims to reduce Switzerland's environmental footprint to a sustainable level by 2050.
Photo: Keystone



overfishing, and ensure the sustainable use of natural resources. "The throw-away economy has to become a circular one, focussing on long-life products and the recycling of waste as raw materials," they say.

The initiative stood no chance in Parliament where it was not deemed business-friendly enough. The Bernese FDP National Councillor Christian Wasserfallen believes the

mental Protection Act of 1983 was a step too far for Parliament. The Swiss people will now decide solely on the Greens' initiative on 25 September without a counter-proposal.