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Nuclear power: voters to decide whether to pull the plug

On 27 November, the Swiss people will vote on an initiative by the Greens to switch off the country's nuclear reactors.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

The Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 is seen as the spark that triggered Switzerland's gradual withdrawal from nuclear power. However, a number of cantons and municipalities had already discussed and even begun moving away from atomic energy even before 2011. These included the cities of Basel, Berne, St. Gallen, Lucerne and Aarau. Last June, more than 70 % of the inhabitants of Zurich backed a move to sell the city's stakes in the Gösgen and Leibstadt nuclear power stations as well as French plants in Bugey and Cattenom by 2034. What left-wing parties and the Greens hailed as a landmark decision on polling day, the FDP dismissed as merely a symbolic gesture without consequences for the operation of nuclear power stations.

That may be true in the short term, but a vote due in the autumn could very well have serious ramifications. On 27 November, the controversial and at times hotly-debated topic of the future of nuclear power in Switzerland will be determined once and for all. That's when the electorate will get to vote on a Green Party proposal to phase out atomic energy. The popular initiative demands a halt to the construction of new nuclear power stations and that existing plants be taken off the grid within 45 years. If approved, Beznau I and II and Mühleberg would have to be shut down a year after the vote. Gösgen would follow in 2024, while Leibstadt would become the last of Switzerland's five nuclear power stations to be switched off in 2029. Indeed the plants would have to close even earlier if security concerns arose. The initiative also calls for concrete measures to promote the move away from nuclear power: energy-saving measures, energy efficiency and the expansion of the use of renewable energy.

The National Council opposes limits

The Greens aren't alone in wanting to limit the lifetimes of the country's nuclear power plants. Last year, within the framework of the Federal Council's Energy Strategy 2050, the National Council also backed plans to restrict the lifetimes of the oldest nuclear plants to 60 years. However, because the Council of States won't even consider this and the political tide has turned since last autumn's elections, the National Council overturned its earlier decision in March 2016 and now no longer wants to limit the lifetimes of nuclear power plants.

According to Jürg Bieri, the managing director of the anti-nuclear Swiss Energy Foundation (SES), what now remains of the Federal Council and parliament's fundamental decision to abandon atomic energy is little more than "a loose ban on the construction of new nuclear power plants within the Swiss Energy Act". Bieri thinks an orderly withdrawal would "also bring order to the replacement of nuclear power by renewable energy", while setting a specific date for

shutting plants down would "facilitate planning and secure investment for domestic power plants". During the debate in parliament, Berne's Green Party National Councillor Regula Rytz said that any energy strategy that did not include restricting lifetimes would not constitute a genuine abandonment of nuclear power.

"Absolute joke"

Conservative opponents of the initiative argue that Switzerland's nuclear power plants are considered some of the world's safest. Switzerland's ability to meet its energy needs was also raised in the parlia-



If the nuclear withdrawal initiative is approved, plants like that in Beznau would have to be shut down within a year. Photo: Keystone

mentary debate, with some suggesting that if the country took its nuclear plants offline too quickly, more energy would have to be imported in the form of electricity from nuclear, coal-fired and gas-fired power stations. CVP National Councillor Daniel Fässler from Appenzel-Innerrhoden called this "an absolute joke from an ecological and economic perspective". Bernese FDP National Councillor Christian Wasserfallen said it was utopian to want Switzerland to be able to cover 40 % of its energy needs with electricity from alternative sources within ten years.

Whatever voters decide on 27 November, a date has already been set for switching off one of the country's nuclear plants. The Mühleberg plant near Berne is to be taken out of operation on 20 December 2019. BKW has become the first operator to make concrete moves towards phasing out nuclear power, albeit on economic rather than political grounds. The utility company has decided that retrofitting demanded by nuclear watchdog ENSI no longer makes sound financial sense.