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Autor: Müller, Jürg
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Nuclear power stations can continue to operate

The Swiss people rejected the Greens' initiative on withdrawal from nuclear power on 27 November. Withdrawal is nevertheless still on track.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

The shock waves from the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011 have ebbed away. In any event, the Swiss electorate does not favour a rapid withdrawal from nuclear energy. They clearly rejected the Green Party's withdrawal initiative, with 54.2% voting against. Only the four French-speaking cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Neuchâtel and Jura as well as the two half-cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Landschaft approved the initiative. The Swiss have voted on the issue of nuclear energy eight times since 1979. And, with one exception, they have always supported it. Only in 1990 did they approve a ten-year moratorium on the



construction of new nuclear power stations.

This time, however, they had to vote on a complete stop. The Greens were not just calling for a ban on new nuclear power plants but also sought the decommissioning of all five existing Swiss nuclear reactors by 2029 at the latest. Three plants would have been forced to stop operating in 2017. The arguments of the initiative's authors focused on the devastating consequences of a major

Swiss nuclear power stations will continue to operate for the time being – such as the one in Leibstadt in the canton of Aargau.

Photo: Keystone

nuclear accident in densely populated Switzerland. After all, Switzerland has the oldest nuclear reactors in the world. Withdrawal from nuclear power is essentially not in dispute, they argued, given the Energy Strategy 2050; it is just that no structured timeframe has been established. They also said security of supply was guaranteed, with renewable energies from water, solar power, wind and biomass as well as, over the short term, with imported power.

Fears over security of supply

The financially powerful opposition picked up on this point. Over the course of the referendum campaign, they succeeded in undermining confidence in the initiative which initially had good support in surveys. They argued that the popular initiative's roadmap was far too ambitious. Security of supply was a major issue. There was a risk of supply bottlenecks and power outages, not least owing to the overloading of the network infrastructure, contended opponents. Switzerland would make itself dependent on countries abroad and would be forced to buy dirty electricity from foreign coal-fired power plants and nuclear power stations.

There was also intensive debate over the cost of early withdrawal from nuclear energy. The Federal Council anticipated high compensation claims from nuclear power operators. The operators themselves estimated even higher figures during the referendum campaign. The energy group Axpo, for example, spoke of compensation payments of over four billion Swiss francs for the Beznau and Leibstadt nuclear power stations alone.

A soft variant of withdrawal

A further reason for the no vote to the popular initiative was the Energy Strategy 2050 adopted by Parliament last autumn. It acted as an indirect counterproposal to the withdrawal from nuclear power initiative and a kind of soft variant of withdrawal. The building of new nuclear power stations is also prohibited under the strategy. However, the existing nuclear power plants can continue to operate unrestrictedly provided the supervisory authorities deem them safe. In addition, the Energy Strategy 2050 contains a raft of measures aiming to increase energy efficiency and expand renewable energies.

In the opinion of the Berne-based newspaper "Der Bund", the rejection of rapid withdrawal from nuclear energy was "not to be equated with withdrawal from withdrawal. This vote was not about whether but rather how the energy transition should take place". The "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" in turn saw the rejection of the initiative as an absolute vote of confidence, "but it also sets federal Berne the task of initiating the energy transition and the withdrawal from nuclear energy to ensure that this takes place smoothly and in a financially viable way".

The SVP takes a different view. It has called a referendum against the Energy Strategy 2050 as it opposes any state-controlled energy transition which it deems a "planned economy" measure. This should be determined by the market alone, it says. The Swiss people therefore look likely to be voting again soon on the matter of energy.