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Ecological and socially minded or just dangerous?

Precisely a year after the referendum on food safety, the Swiss people will vote on the issue of food again on 23 September 2018. Two popular initiatives concerning food production will be decided on.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

Agricultural policy is one of the most contentious and emotive areas of Swiss politics. Agricultural issues and the interests of society as a whole often conflict irreconcilably. Two popular initiatives from the left and ecological end of the political spectrum have now been added to the already charged debate on the future of Swiss agriculture. Both proposals will be put to the Swiss people on 23 September 2018.

A year earlier, on 24 September 2017, almost 79 % of the Swiss people voted in favour of the counterproposal to a popular initiative put forward by the Swiss Farmers' Union. The principles on food safety have since been enshrined in the Federal Constitution. The main points are:

safeguarding the basis of production, in particular farmland, resource-efficient food production adapted to the location, and an agricultural and food sector aligned with the market. It also aims to put a stop to food waste. The previous bill contained issues covered by the two initiatives now under discussion – fair food and food sovereignty. To some degree, there are overlapping elements in all three initiatives. Calls for the two initiatives still pending to be withdrawn proved to be in vain.

“Healthy, environmentally friendly and fair”

The Greens’ “For healthy, environmentally-friendly food fairly produced” initiative (Fair Food Initia-

tive) calls for environmental and social standards to be applied to imported products. The authors of the initiative argue that the high animal welfare requirements in Switzerland fail to prevent imported meat and eggs from factory farms reaching retail shelves. “Scandalous working conditions” are widespread, even in Europe. Industrial farming is putting pressure on prices worldwide due to free trade, which makes it difficult to provide fair salaries.

The initiative therefore calls for federal government to tighten the general requirements on high-quality food. Legislation should ensure that food is produced in an environmentally-friendly, resource-efficient and animal-friendly way and under fair working conditions. Imported agricultural products must meet these requirements. Federal government should favour imported fair trade produce. It should issue provisions on the authorisation of food and animal fodder and on the declaration of production and processing methods. Federal government could also increase import duties. Furthermore, the processing and marketing of regional and seasonally produced food should be promoted and food waste stopped.

As is often the case, the Federal Council supports these concerns “in principle”. However, national government primarily sees problems with implementation. New, time-consuming and expensive controls would be required to check that imported agricultural goods actually meet the initiative’s requirements. It could also result in trade policy conflicts. The popular initiative is simply irrecon-

**Focus on farming:
The potato harvest
in Kerzers, canton of
Fribourg**

Photo: Keystone



cilable with Switzerland's obligations to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the EU and states with which free trade agreements exist, according to the government.

The SP's counterproposal stands little chance of success

The majority of MPs take the same view as the Federal Council. Committee rapporteur Hansjörg Walter, an SVP National Councillor from Thurgau, also dubbed the initiative infeasible due to international trade law and the excessive controls. Berne BDP National Councillor Heinz Siegenthaler believes correct product declaration is more important than checks. Consumers can already buy healthy and fairly produced food today. Regine Sauter, an FDP National Councillor from Zurich, believes this initiative is about more than just food. It could jeopardise jobs and the attractiveness of Switzerland as a centre of business. Bastien Girod, the Greens National Councillor from Zurich, underlines that there is something wrong with the system if high quality standards are required in Switzerland but are not applied to food imports.

The SP appeared divided over the issue in Parliament. Lucerne SP National Councillor Prisca Birrer-Heimoz warned that pressure on Switzerland to lower its product standards could increase if the initiative were accepted. There is also the risk of higher food prices. On the other hand, Martina Munz, the SP MP from Schaffhausen, believes there are only four countries in the world which spend less money on food than Switzerland in relation to their purchasing power. In a compromise proposal, the Basel SP representative Beat Jans suggested favouring the import of sustainable food by lowering customs duties on them instead of ban-

ning the import of certain products. This counterproposal is just as unlikely to succeed in Parliament as the popular initiative itself.

"Change in agricultural policy urgently required"

The second initiative also found a sympathetic ear in Parliament but ultimately received little support. One of the main reasons for the "For food sovereignty" popular initiative – submitted by the farming union Uniterre and supported by 70 organisations – is discontent with structural change in the agricultural sector. "Two or three farms are closing down every day. Farming income has fallen by 30% over the past 30 years and more than 100,000 jobs have been lost. The food sovereignty initiative will deliver the urgently needed change in agricultural policy," argue the authors of the initiative.

Its aim is "diverse and rural agriculture free of genetic engineering which protects natural resources". Those behind the initiative want "fair prices" and "fair income" for farmers and agricultural workers. Regulative customs duties should enable "fair international trade". It also aims to "encourage short cycles and to enable and revitalise regional production". The initiative's text states that, in addition, federal government should take effective measures aimed at "increasing the number of people employed in agriculture and fostering structural diversity".

In the Federal Council's view, the initiative contains demands already taken into account by federal government's current agricultural policy, on the one hand, and which conflict with it on the other. National government rejects "greater state structural control and additional market intervention". The Bernese SVP National Councillor Erich von Siebenthal sees the

initiative as an "indication of the desperate state of affairs". The prices of agricultural products have fallen over recent years, while the pressure on farms is growing. However, all the parliamentary groups – with the exception of the Greens – opposed the initiative in Parliament. FDP President Petra Gössi believes the proposal is "backward-looking" and heading towards protectionism and a planned economy.

Test run for official agricultural policy

Debate in the National Council primarily focused on the Federal Council's agricultural policy rather than the initiative that is doomed to fail in Parliament. The Federal Council had announced on 1 November 2017 that it intended to base agricultural policy on free trade from 2022. Representatives of the SVP, CVP and left-wing parties, in particular, denounced these proposals as incomprehensible, mainly because the Swiss people had only recently approved the previously mentioned constitutional article on food safety in September 2017, demonstrating their desire to strengthen the agricultural sector.

Despite the fact that almost all the parliamentary groups, with the exception of the Greens, rejected both popular initiatives, the referendum campaign will provide an opportunity for a broad debate on agriculture in general. However, it will also test the mood of the people regarding federal government's agricultural policy in particular.