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Despite rejected initiatives the debate about agricultural policy is still ongoing

Both agricultural initiatives were rejected by voters on the popular vote Sunday of 23 September 2018. However, the topic is by no means off the table – no fewer than five more initiatives envisage changes to Swiss farming policy.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER

The two failed initiatives had similar aims. The Fair Food Initiative intended to enshrine in the Federal Constitution that the supply of environmentally-friendly, animal-friendly and fairly produced food from Switzerland and abroad would be strengthened. It was rejected by 61.3 percent of voters. The initiative for food sovereignty also called for a sustainable, diverse, GMO-free, small-scale and more family-oriented agriculture; the group behind the initiative criticised the opening of the market and the strong international competitive pressure. The popular initiative was rejected even more clearly with 68.4 percent of votes cast against it.

The results cannot be interpreted as a categorical “no” to these issues – surveys conducted prior to the vote showed that both initiatives had high levels of approval. Additionally, organic products are becoming increasingly popular in Switzerland. But obviously consumers prefer to decide for themselves at the shops whether they want to buy organically produced food or not. After all, the arguments of the opponents gained ground in the course of the debate over the initiative. They argued that the protectionist approach of the two proposals is problematic, the implementation would be associated with bureaucratic hurdles and international trade agreements would also be at risk. The debate about Swiss agricultural policy is not over

after the rejection of both initiatives. On the contrary – five further agricultural initiatives are in preparation. In the next few years there will be popular initiatives for a ban on pesticides, clean drinking water, against mass livestock farming, for an import ban on products produced in a way that is cruel to animals, and for nutritional education of the youth.

Moral boost for cycle paths

Meanwhile, bicycles had an easy ride and managed to make it into the Federal Constitution on the popular vote Sunday of 23 September. The counter-proposal to the withdrawn cycling initiative was accepted by 73.6 percent of voters. In future, the federal government will coordinate the construction of cycle paths. However, the cantons and communes will still be in charge. It remains to be seen whether the country will soon have uninterrupted cycle paths. The article of the Constitution does not contain any specific requirements and there are no signs of a genuine construction programme in favour of bicycle traffic. But at least the Federal Constitution now contains something like a moral obligation to embark on one.

Initiative aims to end urban sprawl

Thousands of hectares of farmland and near-natural landscapes have disappeared in recent decades, and urban sprawl continues to progress. Voters have already expressed their views on this issue twice. In 2012, an initiative that limits the proportion of second homes to 20 percent nationwide was adopted, and in 2014 the partially revised spatial planning law came into force (see Swiss Review of September 2018). This is one of the reasons why the Federal Council and parliament are against the urban sprawl initiative of the Young Greens. The implementation of the spatial planning law is in

full swing and is beginning to take effect. The initiative will be put to a vote on 10 February 2019.

The aim of the popular initiative is to prevent a further increase in building zones. New building zones should only be created if an area of at least the same size and comparable soil quality is removed from the building zone. This should enable existing development land to be used more efficiently and allow for sufficiently good land to be preserved for agriculture. The initiative also contains provisions on internal settlement development, on sustainable neigh-

bourhoods and on building outside the construction zones. This goes too far for the opposition, which consists of almost all parliamentary groups except the Greens, while the SP was divided. The opposition believes the initiative is too rigid and does not account for cantonal and regional differences. During the parliamentary debate, everyone expressed their concerns about dwindling farmland and increasing urban sprawl. Yet at the same time, one cannot simply freeze the current situation and “turn rural areas into Heidiland”, as the BDP National Councillor Hans Grunder from Bern put it. (JM)