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The tug of war around Europe continues

The electorate voted resoundingly in favour of stricter gun laws on 19 May. In doing so, it also showed its commitment to Switzerland remaining part of the European Schengen Area. However, the major Europolitical disputes are still to come.

THEODORA PETER

In the future, semi-automatic weapons with large magazines can only be bought in Switzerland with an exemption permit. Gun dealers must report all transactions and amateur gun enthusiasts must register their assault rifles at the cantonal weapons' office. With 63.7 per cent in favour, the public's consent to adopting a corresponding EU weapons' directive into Swiss law was resounding.

The rifle clubs and the SVP were unsuccessful in their opposition to the "EU diktat". The majority of voters did not want to endanger Switzerland's membership of the Schengen Agreement. If the electorate had voted against stricter gun laws, Switzerland would have faced being excluded – with far-reaching consequences for border control and security. The Weapons Directive will improve the police information exchange between the 26 Schengen states. In future, the information system will show whether another Schengen country

has denied someone the right to bear a weapon.

New SVP initiative takes aim at the free movement of persons

Political observers interpret the vote in favour of the gun law as a clear commitment to the bilateral path with the European Union (EU). However, there is a veritable acid test ahead. Next year, the initiative "For moderate immigration" will be put forward for a popular vote. With this "restriction initiative", the SVP and the group Campaign for an Independent and Neutral Switzerland (AUNS) aim to end the free movement of persons. According to the Federal Council, this would probably jeopardise all the bilateral agreements and fundamentally challenge the bilateral path.

Switzerland must clarify the nature of its relationship with the EU anyway. An institutional framework agreement should enable further development of the five existing bilat-

eral agreements and smooth the way for new agreements. However, the negotiated framework agreement does not have a majority in Switzerland ("Swiss Review" 2/2019). The stumbling blocks include the concessions on salary protection, which have weakened the flanking measures against wage dumping. This is why the unions are not supporting the framework agreement. On the other hand, the SVP sees it as a threat to Swiss sovereignty. The Federal Council must find a way to effect subsequent improvements in Brussels. At the time of going to press, the government had not come a decision on how it would proceed. However, the EU has categorically ruled out any renegotiations to date.

Improving the position of older people in the labour market

However, the Federal Council has already made a move domestically that should work in favour of the freedom of movement of persons agreement with the EU. It aims to improve the situation of older Swiss employees on the job market with an impulse programme. Many over 50s had voted in favour of the immigration initiative in 2014 out of fear that they would be threatened by immigrants on the job market. The Federal Council has eased their livelihood concerns by expanding social insurance cover: any jobless person who no longer qualifies for unemployment benefits at the age of 60 will receive a bridging pension until the normal retirement age.

The gun lobby had no chance of success. However, the real test of the country's relationship with the EU is just beginning.

Photo: Keystone

