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“My, what a big mouth you have, grandmother.” “All the better to eat you with!” The wolf dressed as the grandmother had scarcely finished speaking when he jumped from the bed with a single leap and ate up poor Little Red Riding Hood. As soon as the wolf had satisfied his appetite, he climbed back into bed, fell asleep and began to snore very loudly. We all know how Little Red Riding Hood met her gruesome end.

Never trust the big bad wolf was the message we all took to heart as young children.

Fairy tale will flirt with reality in May, when Switzerland decides whether or not the wolf is still big and bad. Voters are set to give their verdict on the Swiss Hunting Act and say whether we should continue to give full protection to the wolves that have repopulated the Swiss Alps and Jura mountains, or whether we should resort to shooting wolves to regulate their numbers and protect the livestock that they have been known to attack.

The Little Red Riding Hood story is still strangely relevant, because the wolf divides opinion. People demonise or idolise this controversial animal depending on what side of the debate they stand. On the one hand we have the animal-loving contingent from the low-lying cantons, who romanticise the wolf as a mythical symbol of the untamed natural world. On the other, the sheep-rearing, anti-wolf mountain farmers who want their livestock to be free of these deadly predators and who feel overlooked by Switzerland's city dwellers. A new divide threatens to split Switzerland along rural and urban lines.

Of course, wolves care little for referendums. They are gradually reclaiming their natural habitat in the Alps and Jura mountains – and will continue to do so regardless of whether we put yes or no on our ballot papers. At least we hope they do. The creature also gives us hope amid the alarming loss of biodiversity and species that we increasingly see in countries such as Switzerland. We thought the wolf had disappeared. It hasn't. Read the article on page 6 to follow its trail.

Voters on 17 May will also decide the fate of the “limitation initiative”, an issue with claws and teeth that is as far removed from a fairy tale as you can get. If the SVP initiative is approved, Switzerland will have to terminate the Swiss-European Union agreement on the free movement of persons (see page 10). The consequences would be far-reaching, especially for the 460,000 Swiss Abroad who live in the EU and are reliant on Switzerland and the EU having good relations.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover photo: Wolf prints in the snow, Calanda massif (Grisons). Photo: Peter A. Dettling

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