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Autor: Lettau, Marc
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Ray of hope for the Yenish, Sinti and Roma

Are social attitudes changing? A law discriminating against the itinerant way of life has been rescinded. Voters have approved a controversial camping site for itinerant people. And a survey shows that the majority of Swiss are accepting of the itinerant lifestyle.



MARC LETTAU

Switzerland is a cosmopolitan country full of minority languages and cultures. Yet the country's majorities and minorities do not always coexist happily. The Yenish and Sinti minorities have first-hand experience of this. In particular, those who live an itinerant way of life suffer from prejudice. Whenever groups of non-Swiss Roma arrive in Switzerland, the mood turns sour very quickly.

However, according to a representative survey published in March by the Federal Statistical Office and the Service for Combating Racism, the Swiss seem to be more accepting of the itinerant minorities than was generally thought. Some 67 per cent of those questioned consider the itinerant lifestyle of Switzerland's native Yenish and Sinti communities to be part of Swiss diversity, while 56 per cent believe that Switzerland should do more for persons with an itinerant way of life. Irrespective of these positive attitudes, the concerns of the itin-

erant Yenish and Sinti communities are no less significant than they were before. For example, the number of camping sites available to them is not increasing but declining, while proposals for new sites often fall victim to local opposition.

Feelings run especially high when authorities try to create new sites for non-Swiss Roma. Many Swiss Yenish and Sinti are in favour of such sites, because they have sensed how the vitriol directed against their non-Swiss counterparts is also meant for them. In their view, everyone therefore needs to have their own space for peaceful coexistence to work.

A debacle was looming in February, shortly before the aforementioned survey was due to be published. In the canton of Berne, all the signs were that voters would emphatically reject a proposed caravan site for non-Swiss members of the itinerant community. However, a 53.5 per cent majority of Bernese voters approved the loan needed to create the site, which

Members of Switzerland's itinerant community who have been allowed to pitch up on a farm in Bäretswil (canton of Zurich).

Photo: Danielle Liniger

Results of the survey on attitudes towards people with an itinerant way of life: ogy.de/swiss-diversity

is situated near the farming village of Wileroltigen.

First this unexpected verdict at the ballot box, then the eyebrow-raising findings of the survey. Next came a landmark ruling at the end of April, when the Swiss Federal Supreme Court rescinded articles of the Police Act of the canton of Berne that discriminated against itinerant people. The passages in question made it possible to evict itinerant groups from private land very quickly and under threat of punishment without affording these parties the legal recourse to which they would normally be entitled in Switzerland. The Federal Supreme Court said that the clauses were unconstitutional. The Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse, the umbrella organisation for Yenish and Sinti in Switzerland, called the ruling an "important step towards ensuring the protection of minorities in Switzerland", while the Society for Threatened Peoples said that the ruling had "set a precedent in combating discriminatory legal clauses".

Representatives of the Yenish, Sinti and Roma communities told "Swiss Review" that the Berne vote, the survey and the court ruling are encouraging "rays of hope" but nothing more. This is because itinerant people remain in a difficult predicament. Any goodwill towards them quickly evaporates once push comes to shove. For example, the Bernese electorate gave a clear thumbs up to the Wileroltigen caravan site while 91 per cent of voters in the village rejected it.