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Freedom to choose? Voters to decide on burka ban

Should Switzerland prohibit the wearing of full-face coverings in public? Swiss voters will give their verdict next March on an initiative that is calling for just that. The proposal is a classic example of direct democracy in Switzerland. All eyes will be on Ticino in the run-up to the vote.

GERHARD LOB

Ticino did its own thing when it banned the wearing of full-face coverings in public – the first canton to do so, after a popular initiative was emphatically accepted by 65.2 per cent of Ticinese voters in September 2013. Although the initiative was actually aimed at prohibiting burkas and niqabs (and “countering Islamification”), the amendment to Ticino’s cantonal police legislation resulted in all types of full-face covering being banned. Demonstrators and football fans, for example, are no longer permitted to conceal their faces in public either. The law came into force on 1 July 2016.

Still allowed:



Hijab



Chador

To be banned?



Niqab



Burka

The Ticino initiative was down to a man called Giorgio Ghiringhelli, who is now 67 years old and somewhat of a political loner. Ghiringhelli, a former journalist, says that he is alarmed at the “Islamification of Europe”, explaining that the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA sparked his activism. “Afterwards, I read essays on Islam by Oriana Fallaci that shook me up.” In 2010, Ghiringhelli launched a petition calling for a ban on full-face coverings, quickly followed by a cantonal popular initiative that was modelled on a similar ban enacted in France. Ticino’s cantonal parliament rejected this effort – concluding that it was a “non-issue”, given that women wearing full-face coverings were practically never seen in the canton.

But Ghiringhelli would not let it go. He refused to withdraw the initiative, insisting that full-face coverings were the “thin end of the wedge”. In his view, the niqab is a symbol of oppression. A majority of Ticino voters chose to back him up. Ghiringhelli also hoped for a copycat effect, and this was actually what happened. The canton of St. Gallen introduced a ban on full-face coverings on 1 January 2019 – again following a popular vote (66.7 per cent in favour). However, Glarus’s annual open-air assembly, the *Landsgemeinde*, rejected a similar cantonal proposal in 2017. Instead of a canton-wide ban, there were calls in Glarus for a nationwide ruling on the matter.

This is exactly what the “Yes to a ban on face coverings” popular initiative aims to achieve. This initiative is based almost word for word on the legislative text banning full-face coverings in Ticino. It was launched in

October 2017 after amassing 105,000 valid signatures. The popular vote is scheduled for March 2021. The Egerkingen Committee, headed by the Lucerne SVP National Councillor Walter Wobmann, is behind the initiative. Its successful anti-minaret initiative in 2009 attracted international attention, because it led to a national ban on the construction of minarets.

The Federal Council and parliament have rejected the Egerkingen Committee’s latest project, saying that it infringes the autonomy of the cantons, while pointing out that very few women in Switzerland wear burkas or niqabs in the first place. According to a government estimate, only 95 to 130 women in the entire country wear full-face coverings.

The debate on banning full-face coverings is also about religious freedom, women’s rights, the right of women to self-determination, dress codes, and the role of Islam in society. Yet there is an economic element as well. Some people say that any ban would have a detrimental impact on tourism, and that regions popular among Arab visitors would lose out as a result. “An exemption for tourism would not be possible,” said the head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police, Karin Keller-Sutter, during the parliamentary debate.

To date, only a very small handful of fines have been issued in Ticino against women wearing full-face coverings. Nearly all of these were picked up by Nora Illi – the controversial co-founder of the Swiss Central Islamic Council who deliberately showed up in the canton wearing a full-face veil in protest. Illi, a Swiss convert to Islam, died in March 2020. Meanwhile, St. Gallen cantonal police say that they have not imposed a single fine yet for similar infractions.

The Ticino police have produced leaflets explaining the ban in English and Arabic. However, some tourists have circumvented the ban by swapping their veils for a ubiquitous symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic: medical face masks. This trend has been notable among visitors to the open-air miniature model museum *Swissminiatur*, a venue popular among Arabs. Despite this, the effect on tourism appears to be minimal. “The so-called burka ban



A veiled tourist and a local folklore group in Geneva – the Egerkingen Committee wants to ban cultural encounters like this one. Photo: Keystone (2015)

has had zero impact from our point of view,” says Giuseppe Rossi, general manager of Hotel Splendide Royal, a luxury five-star venue situated on the shores of Lake Lugano. Since the introduction of the ban, the proportion of Arab guests at the hotel has remained the same.

Visitors from the Gulf States accounted for 32,000 overnight stays in Ticino last year, equivalent to 1.7 per cent of all guests. However, Ticino saw a 28 per cent decline in overnight stays by tourists from the Gulf States between 2015 and 2019. “It is hard to say what effect the ban on full-face coverings has actually had, because only a small percentage of our Arab guests wear burkas or niqabs,” says the Ticino tourist board, Ticino Turismo. The drop in numbers is not attributed to the burka ban, but to the rift between Qatar and the Gulf Cooperation Council resulting in reduced flight routes to Europe.

Nevertheless, tourist destinations with a relatively high proportion of Arab holidaymakers share a certain unease regarding any ban. This was clear to anyone who attended a panel discussion on the anti-burka initiative that took place in Interlaken in January 2017. According to a local newspaper report, the then deputy CEO of the Interlaken tourist board, Stefan Ryser, said, “Visitors from the Gulf States are very good guests. They stay for five nights on average and bring in lots of revenue.” Travel agents in these countries would follow the debate surrounding any ban

closely and draw their own conclusions, he added. On the other hand, a number of hoteliers in attendance noted that European guests felt uneasy when they saw fully veiled women in the breakfast room. Visitors from the Gulf States accounted for 92,000 overnight stays – or 8.6 per cent of all overnight stays – in the Interlaken area last year. These figures are also down, having stood at 120,000 and 13.1 per cent respectively in 2015.

Tourism experts have avoided making any official statements regarding the anti-burka initiative. The Interlaken Tourism Organisation (TOI) says that its position is secular and politically neutral. “Neither do we define our guests by race or religion. Interlaken welcomes all visitors,” says TOI spokesman Christoph Leibundgut. Given the drastic consequences that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on tourism, the implications of a ban on full-face coverings would also appear to be of secondary importance at the moment.

Meanwhile, Giorgio Ghiringhelli has every reason to be happy. Thanks to direct democracy, one man from Ticino has single-handedly managed to escalate a heated debate all the way up to federal level, irrespective of the outcome of the March vote.

GERHARD LOB IS A FREELANCE JOURNALIST BASED IN TICINO