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New attempt at strict climate protection

On 9 February 2025, the Swiss people will vote on the environmental responsibility initiative. This initiative calls for the Swiss economy to consume considerably fewer resources, in order to protect the climate and the environment. Opponents are warning of an “elimination of well-being”.

THEODORA PETER

The popular initiative “for a responsible economy within planetary limits” is going before voters at a politically unfortunate time for its authors. Only a few months ago, the biodiversity initiative was flatly rejected by the electorate (see article on the left). In a world filled with war and economic uncertainty, ecological issues are clearly facing an uphill struggle. “We’re under no illusions here: getting the measure approved is going to be a major challenge,” says Magdalena Erni, co-chair of the youth section of the Swiss Green Party and spokesperson for the Alliance for Environmental Responsibility. However, the devastating storms of the past summer have shown precisely how urgent it is that we commit to greater protection for the climate and the environment, she says. The idea behind the environmental responsibility initiative dates back to 2021, when Switzerland’s ambitions to fight climate change suffered a stinging setback: the people narrowly voted to reject the CO₂ Act (see “Review” 4/2021). The Young Greens then launched a fresh attempt in the wake of this defeat. This was prompted not by frustration, according to Erni, but by the awareness “that things really need to move forward now”.

The initiators based the attempt on the scientific concept of planetary limits. According to this principle, climate and biodiversity are two of several load limits that have already been exceeded. Water consumption and emissions of nitrogen and phosphorus are also higher than the levels the planet can bear. The environmental responsibility initiative is therefore calling for action from the Swiss economy: it should restrict the consumption of resources to covering basic needs. This objective is to be reached within ten years. “We have already lost too much time in reaching climate goals,” Erni says to justify this deadline.

Federal Council and parliament opposed

The Federal Council flatly rejects the initiative. It would cause “serious interference with freedom of decision”, according to Environment Minister Albert Rösti (SVP). The ‘antiliberal’ issue was also widely rejected in parliament. The conservative parties even referred to it as a potential “elimination of well-being”. Even the Green Liberals consider the implementation of the initiative “impossible” – particularly within ten years, which would result in “draconian regulation”. In the Left-Green camp, the SP pleaded in vain for a counterproposal without the contentious ten-year deadline. The parliamentary majority decided to put the initiative to a popular vote without



Swiss members of the Young Greens are seeking to have “planetary limits” respected with their initiative.
Photo: Keystone

offering any alternative. As expected, the economy is also against the environmental responsibility initiative.

Alexander Keberle, head of the environment section at economiesuisse, described the proposal in a blog as “post-capitalistic pie in the sky”. Switzerland obviously needs to reduce its planetary footprint further, “but it should not turn itself into a developing nation in the process”. The “extremely low” consumption of resources required by the initiative is first and foremost a sign of “extreme poverty”, as Keberle wrote in allusion to countries like Afghanistan, Haiti and Madagascar, which do respect planetary limits.

In comparison, Switzerland achieves over 80 times the economic performance per capita, while its ecological footprint is “only” around five times larger. Growth does not necessarily lead to greater strain on the environment, argues the business representative: Switzerland has more than doubled its industrial value generation since 1990, while simultaneously lowering emissions by almost half.

The environmental responsibility initiative is the only proposal being put to the vote on 9 February.