

Swiss voters reject xenophobic anti-refugee initiative

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The xenophobic “enforcement initiative” of the right-wing populist Swiss People’s Party (SVP) was rejected on Sunday by a clear majority of 58.9 percent of voters. Turnout was exceptionally high for Swiss standards, at 63.4 percent, the highest level since 24 years ago, when voters rejected joining the European Economic Area.

The clear defeat of the initiative surprised not only the SVP but the establishment parties and the media as well. In the last seven years, the SVP had prevailed three times with xenophobic referendum initiatives. In 2009, 57 percent supported a ban on minarets; in 2010, 53 percent voted “for the expulsion of foreign criminals”; and in 2014, 50.3 percent voted for the initiative “against mass immigration.”

Last autumn, opinion polls were predicting that the “enforcement initiative”, which further sharpened the “Deportation Initiative” of 2010, would win more than 60 percent approval. In particular, the EU-wide campaign against refugees and the hysteria over the New Year’s Eve events in Cologne seemed to favour right-wing populist movements.

All the other parties opposed the initiative because they feared Switzerland would be isolated, with adverse effects for the Swiss economy. However, as was the case when confronted with previous SVP initiatives, they offered no serious opposition to the costly and aggressive campaign of the party headed by billionaire entrepreneur Christoph Blocher.

But then a backlash developed in the population, outside the control and influence of the established parties. The naked racism and the injustice of the initiative had apparently hit a nerve. If passed, the referendum meant that foreigners would be deported following two minor offences without any further investigation and without any room for discretion. This would also apply to so-called “secondos”, second-

generation immigrants born in Switzerland, but without a passport.

More and more young people, students, blue- and white-collar workers came forward to condemn the initiative and to call for its rejection. Using the Internet, over 50,000 signatures were collected in a very short time and well over a million Swiss francs gathered for the referendum campaign. The newspaper *20 Minuten* wondered: “In recent weeks, scarcely a day passed without another group speaking out against the SVP.”

The *Tages-Anzeiger* in Zurich wrote: “The opinion polls showed 66 percent saying yes. Everything seemed to be over. And then the debate turned. It turned because a totally unexpected (for the SVP) adversary appeared: the people. ... There were thousands of citizens who went into opposition to the SVP: lawyers, professors, artists, young liberals. Not least, the opposition consisted of the backbone of Switzerland: well-trained professionals.”

Even *Spiegel Online* noted: “Then something happened never before seen: A powerful movement formed itself from out of civil society. ... The counter-campaign did not come from the political establishment, but from ordinary citizens and young students. Suddenly the SVP, which otherwise enjoys saying it represents the people, confronted a massive popular movement.”

The vote then provided a clear picture. Apart from four small, rural cantons in central Switzerland and Ticino, all cantons voted no. In cities with a high proportion of workers and foreigners, turnout and the number of negative votes were higher than average. For example, in the city of Basel over 70 percent rejected the initiative, on a turnout of 67 percent. In Geneva and the canton of Zurich 65 percent voted against.

The clear rejection of the SVP initiative, however,

will not stop the rightward shift of official politics. Since the Deportation Initiative in 2010, all the mainstream parties in parliament, including the Social Democratic SP, have essentially implemented the main policies of the SVP and agreed to amend the Criminal Code in March 2015. This amendment, which differs only slightly from the latest SVP initiative, will now come into force in its place.

Under the new law, “criminal foreigners” must also be swiftly deported if they are convicted of offences such as “theft while committing trespass”, “fraud in the field of social security or welfare” or “forced marriages.” Another offence is “qualified disruption of public transport”, which under certain circumstances could apply when participating in a strike.

The main difference with the SVP initiative is that the law provides for a “hardship test”, granting the judge discretion if the person concerned would otherwise be deported to his or her certain ruin. In addition, a clause stipulates “account must be taken of the particular situation of foreigners who were born or grew up in Switzerland.”

How closely the establishment parties share in their xenophobia was demonstrated shortly after the vote on Sunday evening by Social Democratic Justice Minister Simonetta Sommaruga. She turned to SVP followers with the words: “If you voted Yes because you are for harsh laws against criminal foreigners, then rest assured your concerns will be taken into account with the expulsion law that will now be put into effect.”

The SVP is demanding that the approximate 500 deportations per year at present be increased to 4,000. The justice minister is obviously willing to meet this demand.

The SVP is already preparing its next xenophobic initiatives: An enforcement initiative regarding mass immigration and the “national law before international law” initiative. The latter could undermine essential principles of the Swiss constitution, international law and human rights.



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