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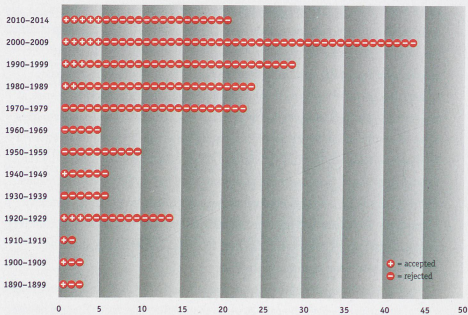
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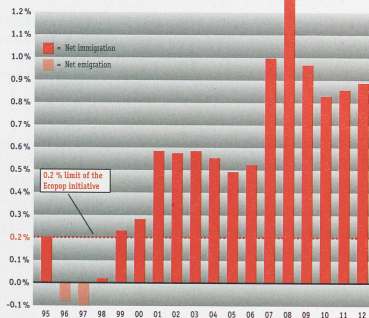


Popular initiatives which have been put to referendum (as at June 2014)



"How many people can the Earth sustain?" is the question that was posed by the Ecopop group on their poster when they submitted the signatures for the initiative in Berne on 12 November 2012

Switzerland's immigration and emigration as percentages



constitutional text obliges the Federal Council and Parliament to introduce a new admission system for all foreigners within three years, which will restrict immigration through maximum limits and quotas.

The question is how, if at all, this can be reconciled with the agreement with the EU on the free movement of persons. The Federal Council is planning to present an implementation concept by the end of June, and by the end of the year the proposals are to be formulated as articles of law which will then enter the consultation process. The art will lie in introducing quotas without at the same time infringing upon the principle of free movement of persons. Discussions with the European Union will take place in parallel to the domestic political process.

**Now comes Ecopop**

But it is not just the implementation of the initiative that is causing a headache for the politicians. The SVP has already threatened an enforcement initiative if the adopted popular initiative is not implemented in the way it believes it should be. And another initiative is already heading for the ballot box, the Ecopop initiative entitled "Stop overpopulation – safeguard our natural environment". This is likely to be put to the vote as early as November 2014.

In specific terms, the initiative is calling for "the permanent resident population not to rise by more than 0.2 percent a year as a result of immigration on a three-year average". That would currently equate to net

immigration of just 16,000 people instead of around 80,000 today. The initiative clearly stipulates, in the transitional provisions, that international agreements which contradict these objectives will have to be either amended or terminated. In other words, the Ecopop initiative is much more radical than the adopted SVP initiative. It would lay down specific figures in the constitution and leave even less leeway for negotiations with the EU. The free movement of persons would no longer have even the slightest chance.

Ecopop, the term being a combination of ECOlogy and POPulation, is a prismatic organisation which appeals to a wide range of groups, including critics of growth as well as xenophobic factions. Ecopop perceives itself as a politically independent environmental organisation which focuses on population issues. Its homepage states: "Our goal is to preserve the natural environment and the quality of life in Switzerland and worldwide for future generations. Ecopop has been committed to opposing the overburdening of nature by an increasingly higher human population for over 40 years." A clear political categorisation of the organisation is not possible. It was founded at the time of the excessive immigration initiatives put forward by James Schwarzenbach, but Ecopop rejected the initiatives of his National Action (NA) movement in the 1970s and 1980s. In the early days, NA President Valentin Oehen and Bernese SP city councillor and femi-

nist Anne-Marie Rey were equally involved in Ecopop.

The modern organisation is very well aware that the direction of its agenda also appeals to groups which it would prefer to have nothing to do with. This is probably why the homepage stresses the following: "Ecopop distances itself from all misogynistic or xenophobic positions and wishes to contribute towards helping all people lead a dignified life irrespective of their nationality."

**Ecopop – "sinister ecologists"?**

This clear-cut distancing from the political right does not quite work in practice. Ecopop was able to place an appeal for support for its initiative in the editorial section of Schweizerzeit, the mouthpiece of the former far-right SVP National Councillor Ulrich Schlüer. The initiative organisers were also able to count on the support of the right-leaning AUNS during the collection of signatures. This organisation distributed signature forms among its members. Ecopop also received official support with the collection of signatures from the Swiss Democrats (SD), a far-right party and the successor organisation to the NA. The party had launched its own initiative on excessive immigration in 2011. As the collection of signatures was not going well, the SD Executive Committee decided in summer 2012 to abandon its own popular initiative and to actively support the "more promising" Ecopop initiative.

The combination of nature conservation issues and immigration is not a new phenomenon. A reactionary ecological ideology has existed since as far back as the 1920s. Balthasar Glättli, a Green Party National Councillor in Zurich, is currently carrying out research for a book with the working title "Unheimliche Ökologen" (Sinister Ecologists) and has discovered "sinister roots": links between conservationists, politicians preoccupied with population issues and eugenicists, the representatives of a science which believes that the population of people whose genetic make-up is desirable or deemed positive should increase while the rise in the population of people whose genetic make-up is categorised as negative is undesirable and should be prevented.

In this respect, the passage in the Ecopop initiative about birth control in the Third World is particularly contentious. In a second development policy section, the initiative calls for Switzerland to use 10% of development cooperation funds on "measures aimed at promoting voluntary family planning". Urs Schwaller, a Council of States member for the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), calls this a "colonial view of family planning in developing countries". Development policy organisations have also voiced severe criticism of this demand.

They believe that Ecopop is ignoring the structural causes of population growth. It is generally recognised today that high birth rates are primarily related to poverty. An abundance of children is seen as a means

of guaranteeing survival. Therefore, in order to reduce family size and population growth, the primary focus must be on promoting the education of women and girls. In an interview with the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung", Shalini Randeria, a professor of anthropology and developmental sociology in Geneva, clearly outlines the attitude that leads to demands such as those made by Ecopop: "It is always other people who are surplus: the poor, the foreigners. (...) It is never just a question of figures but always a matter of who is allowed to reproduce and who is not." The issue of population is inseparable from that of resource consumption, points out the professor, as "the inhabitants of New York City consume more energy in one day than the entire continent of Africa".

Immigration and conservation were also an issue in the 1979 Schwarzenbach initiative. Even back then there was condemnation of Switzerland's urban development. The SVP, which has made immigration its priority issue, initially based its arguments on abuse of the social security system and criminality, but then discovered ecology during the final push in the referendum campaign and displayed images of urban sprawl on its posters.

**Challenge for the Greens and for the SVP**

There are major challenges facing the Greens, in particular, whose leadership is firmly opposed to the Ecopop initiative

and is seeking to play a key role in the referendum campaign. Regula Rytz, Co-President of the Greens, constantly reiterates that the party has no problem with the number of people but rather a per-capita problem. The key factor is the ecological footprint not the number of people. However, the view of the Green Party's grass roots is not yet clear. Representatives of the Greens are also actively involved in Ecopop: Andreas Thommen, former party leader in Aargau, is a member of both the executive committee and the initiative committee.

The position of the political parties is clear. Only the SVP is still tight-lipped, while all the others are opposed to the initiative. In the Council of States, which rejected the proposal in March, the SVP abstained from voting. There are problematic aspects to the initiative, says SVP General Secretary Martin Baltisser, "after all, it does come from the left and green factions as well". He was nevertheless unable to foresee what view the party base will take when it comes to drawing up the position statement. The party is clearly faced with a dilemma: The initiative is far too radical for business groups but it may well receive support from the party's grass roots, like any calls to restrict immigration.

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