

Swiss eye tobacco advertising clampdown

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The Swiss will vote Sunday on whether to tighten their notoriously lax tobacco laws by banning virtually all advertising of the health-hazardous products.

Switzerland lags far behind most wealthy nations in restricting [tobacco](#)

[advertising](#)—a situation widely blamed on hefty lobbying by some of the world's biggest tobacco companies headquartered in the country.

Currently, most tobacco advertising remains legal at a national level, except on television and radio, or ads that specifically target minors.

While some Swiss cantons have introduced stricter regional legislation and a new national law is pending, campaigners insist much tougher restrictions are needed to protect [young people](#) from falling into tobacco addiction.

Under Switzerland's direct democracy system, the campaigners gathered enough signatures to call a [popular vote](#) on their initiative to ban advertising of tobacco products wherever minors might see it.

Recent polls indicate a significant majority of voters favour the initiative, which in practice would effectively ban all tobacco advertising.

But while winning a majority of votes may be easy, it could be more challenging to win over enough of Switzerland's 26 cantons to secure the double-majority needed for the initiative to pass.

'Extreme'

Opponents of the initiative, who include the Swiss government and parliament, say it goes too far.

"This initiative is extreme," said Patrick Eperon, a lobbyist with an employer organisation and a spokesman for the "No" campaign.

By banning basically all tobacco advertising in the name of protecting children, "it infantilises adults", he told AFP.

His concerns echo those voiced by Philip Morris International (PMI), the world's largest tobacco company, which, like British American Tobacco and Japan Tobacco, is headquartered in Switzerland.

"This is a slippery slope as far as individual freedom is concerned," a spokesman for PMI's Swiss section told AFP.

It "paves the way for further advertising bans on products such as alcohol or sugar", he said, acknowledging the company has provided funding to the "No" campaign.

The slippery slope argument figures prominently in ads against the initiative, which feature a large crossed-out sausage, suggesting meat adverts, too, could soon be on the chopping block.

Jean-Paul Humair, who heads a Geneva addiction prevention centre and serves as a spokesman for the "Yes" campaign, flatly rejected that comparison.

"There is no other consumer product that kills half of all users," he told AFP.

'Huge burden'

Tobacco kills more than eight million people worldwide every year, according to the World Health Organization.

Switzerland, a country of 8.6 million people, meanwhile sees 9,500 tobacco-linked deaths every year, while hundreds of thousands of people struggle with chronic illness due to tobacco use.

"It's a huge burden for the health system," said Luciano Ruggia, head of the Swiss Association for Tobacco Control.

He and others charge that intense tobacco industry lobbying has stymied efforts to bring down smoking rates.

Currently, around 27 percent of Swiss adults consume tobacco products—more than double the rate in Australia, which has long had far stricter tobacco advertising laws.

"Switzerland is really lagging behind other high-income countries," said Mary Assunta from the global tobacco industry watchdog STOP, attributing this to the "rather conducive environment for transnational tobacco companies".

The industry contributes around six billion Swiss francs (\$6.5 billion, 5.7 billion euros) to the economy annually—one percent of Switzerland's gross domestic product—and accounts for some 11,500 jobs.

Superfluous?

Opponents of the initiative argue the requested advertising ban is superfluous, since a new, stricter tobacco law is due to take effect next year.

That law, which Swiss lawmakers voted through last September after years of debate, for the first time sets a nationwide minimum age of 18 for the purchase of tobacco.

It also tightens national tobacco advertising restrictions, including banning it on billboards and in cinemas.

But tobacco prevention campaigners insist the new law does little to improve Switzerland's bottom ranking in Europe in terms of tobacco [advertising](#) restrictions.

"Unfortunately, the new law will leave Switzerland in that last position," Pascale Diethelm, head of the OxyRomandie [tobacco](#) control group, told AFP.

"It is a mockery."

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