

Election campaign issues : Switzerland could end up shooting itself in the foot

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The Germans as the new scapegoats

Foreigners and immigration have always been popular election campaign issues. However, this time it is not exotic foreigners who are at the centre of the debate but our European neighbours, who, thanks to the free movement of persons, are arriving in Switzerland in unprecedented numbers.

By René Lenzlin

The figures speak for themselves – the number of permanent foreign residents in Switzerland has increased from 1,406,430 in 1999 to 1,714,004 at the end of 2009. The proportion of foreigners therefore stands at 22%. If temporary residents and asylum seekers are included, the number of foreigners in fact amounts to 1,802,300 or 22.9% of the population. In addition, there are also around 215,000 cross-border commuters who travel to work in Switzerland during the working week. The Swiss Federal Statistical Office had not yet produced definitive figures for 2010 at the time of going to press. However, it is already clear that the proportion of foreigners has risen again.

The constant increase in immigration reflects Switzerland's economic success and the attractiveness of its labour market. However, it also stirs up fears of inundation with foreigners and overpopulation. The environmental movement Ecopop, which wants to restrict immigration through a popular initiative, is addressing these fears. The initiative launched at the beginning of May calls for the growth of Switzerland's resident population to be restricted to an average of 0.2% per year. In recent years, the figure has stood at 1.3%. However, politicians are also addressing these concerns, particularly in the current election campaign where foreigners have become a major issue.

Nine out of ten come from the EU

And this issue has a name – the free movement of persons. The headlines are focusing less on foreigners of exotic appearance with foreign-sounding names and much more frequently on immigrants from the European Union. There has been a disproportionately high increase in their numbers since the agreement between Switzerland and the EU on the free movement of persons entered into force in mid-2001. The average annual rise in the foreign resident population has since increased from 26,000 to 37,400, as a

recently published federal government report shows. Citizens of the EU and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) have accounted for 89% of the growth during this period, whereas previously it was almost exclusively foreigners from outside these states who immigrated.

The highest growth rates over the past decade have been among German and Portuguese citizens. The number of Germans in Switzerland increased from 87,000 to 119,000 between 1992 and 2001 or by 3.3% per year on average, whereas the rise between 2002 and 2010 stands at 17.6% per year. 277,000 Germans were living in Switzerland at the end of last year. The number of Portuguese was almost the same. Their average annual increase rose from 3.7% before the free movement of persons to 8.7% after it.

Protective measures

This new immigration structure has also changed the political debate. The traditional approval from the left and the unions of greater openness or even EU accession has decreased significantly. In terms of immigration policy, these political factions are now primarily pushing for protective measures for the middle classes against foreign competition in the labour and housing markets instead of greater integration support for poorly educated foreigners. At the other end of the political spectrum, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) considers itself vindicated in its traditional scepticism about immigration. It is calling for Switzerland to regulate the number of immigrants again. It is proposing the renegotiation of the agreement on the free movement of persons or its termination altogether.

The Federal Council and the centre parties – the Free Democrat Liberals (FDP) and Christian Democrats (CVP) – reject this proposal. They are ready to take stronger action against any abuse of salary and employment conditions, but they emphasise,

in particular, the positive aspects of the free movement of persons, which provides Switzerland with skilled labour and has contributed to the economic success of recent years.

Immigration continues during downturn

The previously mentioned federal government report confirms the immigration of highly qualified workers. Experts say that this trend started before the free movement of persons but has subsequently intensified. Half the foreigners in employment who immigrated to Switzerland between June 2002 and May 2009 have a degree. Another third have school-leaving qualifications or have completed vocational training.

However, the report also indicates that not all aspects of the free movement of persons are working as anticipated. Although net immigration fell during the recent economic crisis compared to the previous boom phase, the immigration surplus remained at a "relatively high level by long-term comparison" in 2009 and 2010. No clear conclusions can yet be drawn about the impact on unemployment. This is highest among foreign nationals from outside the EU/EFTA. The report says that this phenomenon is not new and neither can it be attributed originally to the free movement of persons. However, the additional recruitment pool is making it more difficult for this group to find employment again. The same applies to the regions with high numbers of cross-border commuters. There were "indications that it was becoming more difficult for job-seekers to find positions" there.

A clear majority has always supported the free movement of persons in several referenda. The October elections will show whether the people will continue to pursue this course or back those who are calling for rigorous "entry controls" or even limitations on immigration.

Switzerland could end up shooting itself in the foot

Calls have been made from various sides for Berne to continue negotiating with the EU in the debate on the free movement of persons. More radical factions believe that if this approach were to fail, the whole agreement should be revoked. Owing to the "guillotine clause", this would torpedo the entire "bilateral I" set of agreements and would leave Switzerland in a more isolated position. By Peter Winkler

One of the negotiating partners rolls his eyes: "That is inconceivable." The other snorts: "That's an extremely bad idea, especially in the current climate." The first is a Swiss diplomat who deals with the EU on a daily basis and knows how Brussels works inside out. The second is on the staff of José Manuel Barroso – President of the EU Commission – and specialises in relations with Switzerland. The pair often take up opposing positions on specialist issues but they agree here – a demand from Switzerland for follow-up negotiations on the bilateral agreement on the free movement of persons would have little prospect of success and could do significant damage.

Such a demand would be very difficult for the EU to accept and would also come at an extremely bad time for various reasons.

Shaken to its foundations

The euro crisis has shaken the EU to its foundations. The euro, like the free movement of goods and persons, is one of the cornerstones of the single market and is the most advanced part of European integration. Let us not forget that the first aim of reconciliation after the Second World War was to deliver tangible economic success, with political union to be achieved later. Tensions over the free movement of persons arose at the same time as the euro crisis, with the Roma issue in

France, the Franco-Italian row over Tunisian economic migrants and finally Denmark's decision to reintroduce border controls. The EU Commission, which regards itself as the custodian of treaties and the guardian of integration achieved thus far, responded angrily to these attempts to undermine the free movement of persons even though externally this was only perceived as a verbal reproach in some quarters. It is inconceivable that the Commission would support a non-member state in such circumstances over a proposal that would only weaken the freedom of movement principle.

Impasse over bilateralism

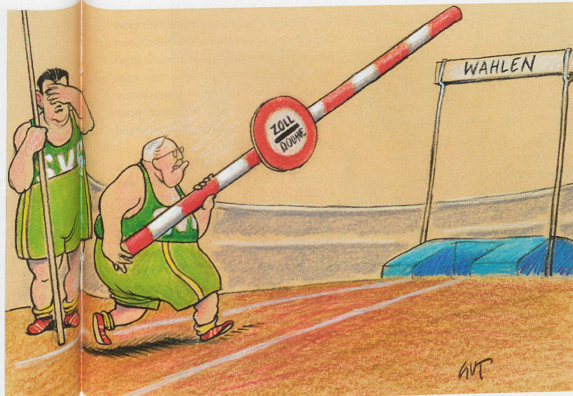
A stalemate has been reached in the negotiations over bilateral relations. The reason is very evident. The EU wants Switzerland to implement new developments in EU law more quickly and systematically to prevent an increasing distortion of competition between the Member States and Switzerland. It also wants to resolve differences in the interpretation of bilateral agreements and disagreements over their application in an institutionalised way. The only option to date has been the joint committees in which both partners – put simply – can voice their disagreement.

Switzerland is struggling with the EU's proposals and opposition is widespread for various reasons. However, all EU institutions – Parliament, Commission and Council – are insisting on them. For Switzerland to worsen the deadlock by making new and indeed unattainable demands of the EU would hardly be expedient.

Additional EU demands

There is another argument against undoing the agreement on the free movement of persons. The EU would like Switzerland to adopt the changes introduced by the EU Citizens Directive of 2004. The Federal Council declared that it had no intention of doing so at the meeting of the joint committee in mid-June. One reason is that under the 2004 directive the right of residency and entitlement to welfare benefits would no longer be dependent on gainful employment, which is the rule that currently applies. The EU would almost certainly put its proposals back on the table in follow-up negotiations, which would leave Switzerland involved in negotiations that it has sought to avoid.

PETER WINKLER was the NZZ's correspondent in Brussels until May 2011 and has since then been reporting from Washington.



INITIATIVE GEGEN MASSENEINWANDERUNG

Christoph Blocher is aiming to get back into parliament through his "stop mass immigration" popular initiative. Even in his own party not everyone is behind this.