

An outside perspective on Switzerland

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An outside perspective on Switzerland

The election campaign in Switzerland is in full swing and obviously the candidates and parties are making lots of promises about the future. The election campaign nevertheless also provides an opportunity for reflecting on the past few years. We have therefore invited two observers, the correspondents from two leading foreign newspapers, "Le Monde" and "Süddeutsche Zeitung", to share their insights into Swiss politics and the election campaign with the Swiss Abroad.

Switzerland torn between openness and protectionism

The last legislative period was marked by the nation's desire to escape the European crisis... but in vain. The same issue will have a major influence on the forthcoming federal elections.



MARIE MAURISSE, "LE MONDE" CORRESPONDENT
IN SWITZERLAND

Switzerland has spent the past four years walking a tightrope. On one hand, it has attempted to avoid contagion by the crisis rocking the European Union at all levels – economically and politically. On the other, it has sought to continue supporting Swiss growth, which depends heavily on trade with and labour from neighbouring states. Three key events have illustrated the difficulty faced by the nation in maintaining this delicate balance.

On 9 February 2014, the Swiss people supported the reintroduction of immigration quotas by voting yes to the popular initiative put forward by the Swiss People's Party (SVP), the country's biggest political party. The result was a political bombshell and presented a headache for the Federal Council. The self-sufficient tendencies of the Swiss people contrast starkly with the reality of the situation faced by Switzerland, where companies desperately need foreign workers in order to operate. Is it politics that determines the state of the economy or vice-versa? The Federal Council has to find a way forward but the "Get out of the blind alley. Don't reintroduce immigration quotas!"

committee wants the Swiss people to vote again. The coming months will prove decisive.

End of the minimum rate and banking secrecy

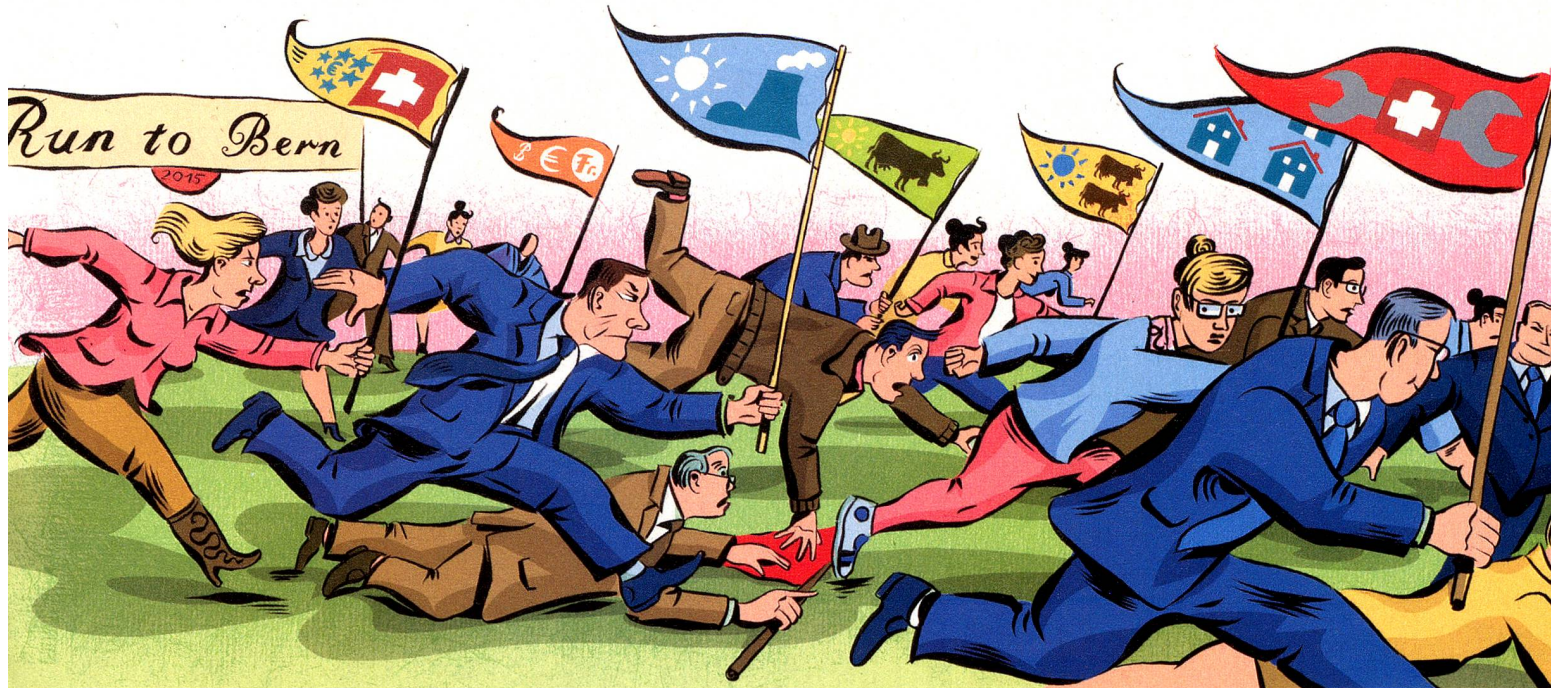
The other indicator of Switzerland's swaying between autonomy and dependence is the decision by the Swiss National Bank (SNB) on 15 January to abandon the minimum rate introduced in 2011 to counteract the appreciation of the Swiss franc. Thomas Jordan, chairman of the SNB, now believes that artificially keeping the currency at reasonable levels is too expensive. Companies have to manage on their own to remain competitive despite the strong Swiss franc. Swiss SMEs and the tourism industry are flagging, and the central bank is being put under pressure. Regardless of whether it wants to be or not, Switzerland is not an island in the heart of Europe, and its GDP is heavily influenced by the euro crisis.

Moreover, the country no longer wants to go it alone. That is the final point of this synopsis. On 27 April, Berne signed an agreement on the automatic exchange of information with the European Union that will effectively bring an end to banking se-

crecy from 2017. This is a Swiss speciality which has disappeared in favour of a globalised system based on the transparency of banking flows. This development will not be restricted to foreign clients holding accounts in Switzerland, as the experts believe the Swiss themselves will undoubtedly renounce banking secrecy soon. That is assuming the popular initiative entitled "Yes to the protection of privacy", which is to be voted on at referendum over the coming months, is not approved by the Swiss people.

Swiss politics under European influence

Switzerland's heart remains torn between openness and protectionism. Antoine Chollet, a political scientist at the University of Lausanne, believes the SVP has won a symbolic battle. The European Union has increasingly less credibility in the eyes of the Swiss, and the idea of accession has completely disappeared from the agendas of the Swiss parties. "Swiss politics nevertheless remains highly influenced by Europe," according to this expert, the author of the book "Défendre la démocratie directe" (Defending Direct Democracy). In his view, "the consequences of the end of the minimum rate and the referendum of 9 February, two sovereign decisions, will indicate to what extent we are dependent on the countries surrounding us". The SVP's performance at the forthcoming elections will set the tone.



More courage, fewer aperitifs

The Federal Council has set a topic that could act as a pointer in the election campaign.



CHARLOTTE THEILE, SWITZERLAND CORRESPONDENT FOR THE "SÜDDEUTSCHE ZEITUNG"

The campaigning for the National Council elections has been going on at least since February. Roger Köppel, editor-in-chief and publisher of "Weltwoche" who has been appearing on all the talk shows in Germany, declared that he wanted to enter Parliament for the SVP in Zurich. In fact, it was not so much that he wanted to but that he had to. He felt compelled owing to the "disastrous policies of the left-wing majority in Berne". His candidacy – and concerns over pushing long-serving SVP politicians down the list – was the main election campaign issue for almost two months. The SVP caused the next big stir in April. Magdalena Martullo-Blocher, CEO of Ems-Chemie and Christoph Blocher's daughter, also decided to stand for election, not in Zurich but in Grisons. The headline in the German weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" was "Hooray, hurrah, everyone to Chur".

The battle over Blocher's political legacy

What would the high-profile newcomers bring? This was not evident. Would

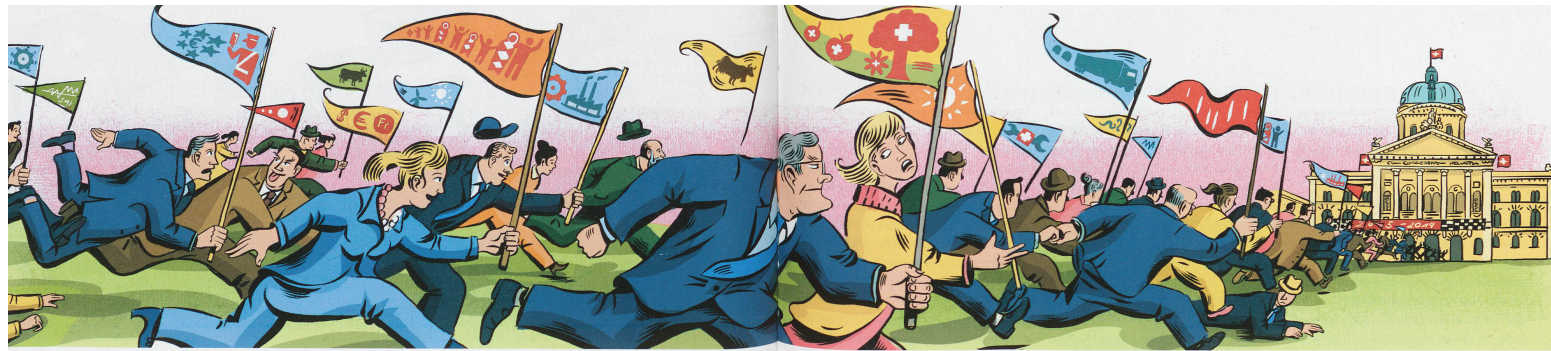
the SVP succeed in using the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean for its own political ends? There was also uncertainty over this. While political scientists are observing a slight "shift to the right", the FDP is more likely to benefit from this. It comes as little surprise that the main issues over recent months have been related to the economy. The Swiss have been experiencing firsthand since January what it means to live with a safe-haven currency. Kilometre-long tailbacks of cars heading towards Germany to go shopping, longer working hours for the same salary and the relocation of industrial jobs – the consequences of the strong Swiss franc are real and tangible. What answers Switzerland can provide to this currency crisis remains to be seen given that it is stemming from Greece and the EU. Nevertheless, economic competence seems a more important factor in this election campaign than in the past. That said, the election campaign has not yet really got going. The major parties are primarily focussing on mobilising their core voters – free aperitifs rather than addressing issues. And the "course-setting elections" forecast by SP President Christian Levrat –

right or left, an outward-looking perspective or isolationism, social democracy or economic liberalism – is actually a claim that could be made every four years.

The Federal Council nevertheless set a topic at the end of June that could act as a pointer this summer. The negotiations with the EU are to be restructured over the coming weeks. There is to be a chief negotiator who will now not just discuss the new provisions on immigration but also research matters, institutional cooperation and the European electricity market. The Federal Council anticipates the initial proposals by the autumn. If such a package-solution approach were to come off, this would represent a resounding success for Swiss diplomacy. Taking a step further towards "fitting a square peg into a round hole" – as many people called the implementation of the immigration quotas adopted in 2014 – would be good news for the Federal Council shortly before the elections. But Berne is taking a big risk with this strategy. Even though the EU has refused to negotiate, the expectation has been raised in Switzerland that an outcome to negotiations will soon be achieved.

Attention given to mavericks

A few candidates creating a stir, economic issues and perhaps some suc-



cess with a relaxed negotiating strategy – these do not sound like major surprises during the elections. A good deal of attention is being dedicated to even tiny parties, such as the Artists' List whose own estimations indicate potential support of less than one per-

cent. Their ideas may sound similar to those of the Greens or SP – the environment, refugees, education and EU relations. The well-known author Ruth Schweikert nevertheless believes a new party is needed. That means room for utopian ideas and un-

conventional candidates. The artists have hit upon an important point here – courageous ideas and new and perhaps also awkward politicians are probably the best thing that could happen to the election campaign over the coming weeks.

Parliament and the concerns of citizens

With the elections on 18 October the 49th legislative period of the federal government will come to an end. What were the issues that impacted the Swiss political world the most from 2011 to 2015, and how well did the political system function? An analysis by Thomas Milic

Foreign affairs

The most significant event of the last four years, one that the public, Parliament, government and media were all talking about, was the narrow approval by Swiss voters of the immigration initiative on 9 February 2014. This initiative represented a break in Switzerland's relationship to the EU, as it called into question the bilateral path that had been approved several times by voters in initiatives. But there was more to it than that. The outcome of the voting also slowed down negotiations with the EU over an institutional framework agreement, the ratification of which will only be possible if a solution to the issue of the free movement of persons has been found. Had Swiss voters approved the Ecopop initiative that was up

for a vote just a few months later, on 30 November 2014, this most likely would have signalled the end to the bilateral agreements. But the initiative was unexpectedly clearly rejected.

Supporters of the bilateral path will have only a short break, however, as the outcome of the negotiations with the EU is difficult to predict. The searched-for form of implementation that can be broadly accepted has proved elusive. And because Parliament, which is badly divided in the area of foreign affairs, is unlikely to find a solution for implementation, it will probably be up to the voters to break through this Gordian knot with another referendum.

Foreign affairs is currently so dominated by the implementation of the immigration initiative that other international issues have

practically been forgotten. But these other issues are hardly insignificant. The FATCA agreement with the United States has meant the de facto suspension of banking secrecy with US clients. "Swallowing the toad", as finance minister Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf called it, was finally approved by Parliament by a surprising large majority, although not without some misgivings. Three other tax disputes were also settled, as tax agreements with the UK and Austria were signed in 2012, and with Italy in 2015. A similar solution with Germany was rejected by the German Parliament.

Immigration and asylum policies

The immigration initiative is an issue that the SVP put forward. It has both a foreign

policy and an immigration policy dimension, and because of this it is difficult to interpret the voters' decision. Trying to limit immigration was not the only topic that the SVP took on. The first initiative to deal with the issue of foreigners in Switzerland came in 2010 – the SVP deportation initiative. The point of this initiative was not to limit immigration, but the automatic deportation of foreigners who were engaged in criminal activity. The SVP was unhappy with how this initiative was being implemented, so it submitted an enforcement initiative in 2012. This was a new event in Swiss politics. For the first time ever, a political party tried to impose its meaning on the constitutional text that voters had approved through another initiative. In light of the rising success with initiatives and the simultaneous international integration of Switzerland, the future will likely see more initiatives to enforce legislation.

When it comes to asylum policies it is currently the proverbial calm before the storm. The ongoing wars and revolutionary unrest in parts of Europe have led to a rapid increase in the numbers of refugees. This makes it crucial for there to be a pan-European coordination of asylum policies. And Europeans don't want Switzerland to stand on the sidelines. But the debate will be fierce, as with almost no other issue are there such differences in the views between the right and left as there are over asylum policies. It is possible to make a forecast here: the asylum issue will most

likely be one of the dominating themes of the upcoming legislative period and even of the coming election campaign.

Energy policies

The key event that shaped the energy debate during the last legislative period is actually a leftover from a prior period: shortly after the Fukushima catastrophe (and just before the 2011 elections) the Swiss Parliament decided on a gradual withdrawal from nuclear energy. The four female members of the Federal Council at the time were the proponents of this measure. But the government did not set a specific deadline for the withdrawal. A deadline would depend on the safety of the nuclear power plant, the government said at that time. It is uncertain whether there will ever be a deadline for withdrawal, however, as the energy strategy 2050 has run into criticism primarily from the right, but also from the left (see also party surveys on page 14).

Social policies

Nobody would disagree that demographic changes are making adjustments necessary in both social policy and healthcare. And everyone would also agree that time is of the essence in both areas. The Swiss social security system (AHV) is facing a deficit of billions of francs in a few years, while healthcare costs are rising without interruption. The answers from the Federal Council to these chal-

lenges are "Retirement 2020" and "Healthcare 2020". The retirement issue takes pride of place for Federal Councillor Alain Berset. Critics have pounced on his plan from all directions. Berset's own party, the SP, has rejected his call to raise the retirement age for women to 65. The conservative parties and the business world believe that the financing is too focused on bringing in more revenue, especially through an increase in VAT. There remains quite a bit of work to do until a retirement reform package is ready that a majority will support. The Federal Council's plans for reforming healthcare are under less pressure.

Defence and security

The planned upgrading of the Air Force was the main defence issue of the legislative period that is ending. The ageing Tiger planes were to be replaced by 22 fighter jets of the Swedish type Gripen. But before the Federal Council announced its decision in favour of the Gripen, internal documents were leaked to the public in which the Swedish fighter plane was given poor marks. The supporters of the Gripen were never able to recover from this setback. There was fierce debate in Parliament regarding procurement. And in contrast to earlier deals for defence and security, the line separating support and opposition did not run along the classic left-right divide, but also ran right through the conservative parties. In the eyes of the supporters of the