Switzerland: a historical milestone with potentially devastating repercussions

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Abstract

On 30 July 1965 the Federal Chancellery witnessed its first popular initiative against foreign infiltration, which garnered 60,000 signatories and received backing from Zurich’s Democratic Party. The referendum sought to reduce the immigrant population by ten per cent. Since then, there have been a number of similar initiatives culminating, on 9 February 2014, in a proposal seeking to limit the enforcement of the Schengen agreement, effectively calling into question the right of EU citizens to circulate freely in Switzerland. Then as now, such actions point to the fact that the threat from outsiders is felt very strongly among EU citizens.
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The institutionalisation of xenophobic movements in Switzerland began almost fifty years ago and received legitimation in the mid 1980s, a decade before the Lega Nord (in Italy) and the Front National (in France) came out of the shadows. Indeed, Christophe Blocher's Swiss People's Party has been part of the Federal Assembly for over ten years.

The fear of foreign infiltration, or Überfremdung, returned with a vengeance during the 1960s. The concept goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and was at the heart of Swiss political and intellectual debate from the mid 1960s well into the following decade. Renowned Swiss writer Max Frisch gave this apt description in 1966:

“What do we mean by foreign infiltration? The young man who takes my bag in the hotel, the waitress on room service, the barman, the night porter, the waiter who serves me breakfast – in short, all the people who ensure that my stay here in my homeland is enjoyable – are, respectively: Spanish, Yugoslavian, Italian, another Italian, yet another Italian and a man from the Rhineland region of Germany. To say nothing of the people who wash the dishes and do my laundry. The only one who speaks in the Swiss dialect is the owner. Is this not perhaps Überfremdung, foreign infiltration?”

The debate raged on, coming to a head in 1969 with the second anti-foreign initiative – probably the most widely recognised until last February – known as Schwarzenbach (after its promoter), and continued into the 1970s. The referendum questions were continually rejected, not for trivial humanitarian reasons but because they made little economic sense for the ‘small nation in the heart of Europe’ model, although to this day the weight of the foreign presence in percentage terms has not undergone any significant variations. Italians still represent the largest foreign community, numbering almost 300,000 residents, to which we must add 200,000 who have acquired Swiss citizenship and have therefore been removed from the list.

Next, we find Germans (280,000) and Portuguese (slightly less than 240,000). Even the number of frontaliere (inhabitants of neighbouring countries) – individuals who work in Switzerland but reside and live across the border (Italy, France and Germany) – has remained largely unchanged in the past thirty or forty years. However, events following the 9 February vote could mark a turning point for Europe as we have come to know it in the last decade (the changes have already been felt in the academic sphere: research funds have been frozen and the influx of foreign students affected). All the more so as it was designed not so much to impose a cap on foreign immigration in general but to limit the presence and free circulation of EU citizens. Aside from the Euro, and perhaps even more than the single currency, Schengen represents the very essence of the EU, an identity that has been called into question by the Swiss vote.

The Helvetian Paradox
In this context, Switzerland constitutes a contradictory analytic model. In the last century, it was the European country with the highest immigration rate and in1990 one-fifth of its citizens were born abroad (more than...
double the rate registered in the US, a nation forged by immigration, in the same period). In a country that has doubled its population in less than forty years, from just over four million after the Second World War to more than eight million today, this issue is the constant focus of political deliberations and public debate. And yet the Swiss Confederation – a multilingual, federalist democracy based on power sharing and consent – was, together with the US, the first country (from the 1930s) to introduce complex quantitative measures regulating immigration and foreign communities. Whereas the US, in 1921 and 1924, introduced a system of quotas (Immigration Act), in 1931 Switzerland laid the foundations for its current normative structure by passing a federal law on the residence and settlement of foreign citizens.

From a legal perspective, the Italian community was often treated as a guinea pig for relevant legislation. In 1948, Switzerland began to gradually move away from its traditional laissez faire approach (a tendency that became more noticeable from the second half of the 1960s) by signing its first ever workforce recruitment deal with a third country, Italy. The years between the end of the Second World War and the mid-1970s witnessed higher rates of economic growth and expansion than had ever been recorded in Europe. No European country has managed to achieve the favourable and enduring conditions needed to replicate this economic feat, which succeeded in tripling GDP. This was made possible by the presence of a foreign workforce that, at the end of the 1960s, already numbered more than one million individuals. During this period, the Confederation held the dubious record of the highest number of work-related accidents and deaths in Europe. The 1965 Mattmark dam tragedy – Switzerland’s own Marcinelle for European migrants – was merely the tip of the iceberg.

Nonetheless, after the xenophobic tension that dominated the decade from the mid 1960s to the second half of the 1970s had abated, Switzerland experienced something quite unique, though its outcome did not ultimately satisfy its supporters. For the first time ever, 1977 saw the presentation of a pro-foreigner initiative known as Mitenand (Sticking Together); it aimed to convey to the general public – who had always rejected xenophobic moves, albeit by a small margin – an awareness of the shared interests of Swiss people and immigrants. The initiative’s supporters sought to ‘combat existing stereotypes and fight for laws based on human rights, social justice and equality at a federal, regional and local level.’ The Swiss people went to the polls on 5 April 1981 and overwhelmingly rejected the initiative with 84% of votes cast against it. For a country which had only granted the vote to women a few years previously (some cantons held out against it until 1990), Mitenand was simply too much of a novelty. What was actually at stake here was the seasonal workers’ statute – a law that was only abolished in 2002 with the introduction of agreements on the free movement of EU citizens. It is precisely these agreements that were called into question last February.

In a similar vein, the country’s relationship with European institutions has always been contradictory. The Confederation has been repeatedly chastised for its lack of immigrant rights. A particularly infamous case consisted in denying family reunion applications to illegal immigrant children, a policy familiar to Swedish authorities and most of the general public from the second half of the 1960s but which came to light almost a decade later in the form of a ‘scandal’. There was also the constitutional ban on politicisation and industrial action for foreigners and the 1937 ‘Peace Agreement’ that limited the role of trade unions compared to private entrepreneurs.

Future risks
It is these quirks and eccentricities that set Switzerland apart as the land of compromise. To this day, large numbers of illegal, undetected workers – more than 100,000 of them – continue to go about their business undisturbed, viewed as an inevitable evil. In fact, some of the more attentive observers and critics believe that the phenomenon is probably on the rise. In this context, it is hardly surprising that many Swiss authorities have already tried to come up with temporary solutions to ensure that the establishment of quotas doesn’t rob important sectors of the country’s economy of manpower they require.

It is worth observing, however, that, unlike past initiatives, the 9 February referendum aimed to challenge agreements guaranteeing the free circulation of EU citizens rather than the presence of foreigners in general. Who will it affect? Mainly Italians, Germans, the French and the Portuguese, although some believe that the unsigned agreement between the Confederation and Croatia helped to precipitate events. The impression is that those who voted no were members of the vast immigrant population from countries that were granted exceptional residency and settlement rights in Switzerland during the Balkan war in the 1990s. From this point of view, the limitations imposed on political asylum in 2006 were a good indication that the mood was shifting.

However, this does not adequately explain the remarkable 68% yes rate registered in Canton Ticino, which hosts 60,000 Italian frontalieri. In Suisse romande, however, where their numbers reach 140,000, residents voted overwhelmingly against, contradicting this model. In all likelihood, the explanation lies in the economic circumstances of individual territories, as it did back in the 1970s. As was the case with ‘Schwarzenbach’ the referendum met with success in cantons with a limited foreign presence and below-par economic performance. Hardly surprising, then, that the most dynamic, important urban centres with a high number of foreign residents (Zurich, Geneva, Basel and the offshore canton of Zug) all voted against.

The institutionalisation of xenophobic movements and ideas may thus have helped keep alive, for many decades, an enduring fear of otherness that rears its ugly head in times of economic distress; a fear that, in Switzerland’s case, is completely unjustified (the unemployment rate is perfectly contained at four per cent). This may lead the
country towards a sort of economic autarchy (a controversial claim, I admit) that calls into question the very economic basis of the small Nation, historically and structurally dependent on an intense exchange of goods and services from abroad, as well as on trade agreements and the internationalisation of its economy.

Switzerland, though it is able to exercise a great deal of destabilising power, was always too ‘small’ to handle the effects of the international economy. This particular vote threatens to disrupt the whole of Europe, bringing about the revolution discussed by Vladimir Ilich Uljanov during his time in Zurich, albeit not quite in the way he envisaged. By obstructing the free circulation of people, it challenges one of the mainstays around which the EU, in its current form, is built.

**Further readings**


Translation by Clara Marshall