The most reluctant country with regard to european integration

NAJY, Cenni Michelangelo, SCHWOK, René

Abstract
Switzerland is unique in its reluctance to join the EU. Indeed, all governments and parliaments in Europe have at least once in their history sought to become a member. This is not the case for Switzerland, which has never started accession negotiations and does not intend to do so soon. Currently the debate is between supporters of maintaining bilateral agreements with the EU and rejectionists who are even ready to give it up. Thus, paradoxically, the British Eurosceptics, who modeled the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and Switzerland, would appear in Switzerland as integrators. To clarify this very particular case, this chapter is based on an analysis grid composed of several levels of explanations (historical, political and economic). The results obtained show that the political theories of euroscepticism are not sufficiently developed to explain this Swiss phenomenon.

Reference

Available at:
http://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:109895
Disclaimer: layout of this document may differ from the published version.
European Integration
and new Anti-Europeanism III

Perceptions of External States
on European Integration

Edited by Patrick Moreau and Birte Wassenberg

Franz Steiner Verlag
THE MOST RELUCTANT COUNTRY WITH REGARD TO EUROPEAN INTEGRATION

CENNİ NAĞİ & RENÉ SCHWOK

In its reluctance about joining the European Union, Switzerland is unique. As a matter of fact, every European government and parliament has expressed his wish to become a member at least once in its history. This goes, without saying, for the 28 member states.

However, it is also the case for Turkey, the Western Balkans, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia. Certainly, these countries are not and perhaps shall never be members of the European Union, but this is essentially because the EU has not welcomed them as new entrants.

The only countries whose cases are comparable with Switzerland are Norway and Iceland, even though their reluctance is less pronounced. We have to remember that the Norwegian government, supported by parliament, was twice on the point of signing the accession treaty to the EU, but the Norwegian people refused to authorize ratification. Even in Iceland, the government had started accession negotiations when a new political majority stopped them.

We should also note that contrary to Switzerland, Norway and Iceland are members of the European Economic Area (EEA). They are thus more deeply integrated than Switzerland. The EEA constitutes a true economic union allowing these countries to access fully the EU’s internal market. This is not the case with Switzerland.

Moreover, Switzerland has never started accession negotiations and has not the slightest intention to do so in the near future. Likewise, the EU has never considered it a candidate country. Relations between Brussels and Bern are built on a bilateral basis. As of 2016, Switzerland and the EU concluded nearly 130 sectoral agreements. Their nature is often considered *sui generis* since the EU has not signed treaties of this type with any other country.

However, this “bilateral way” has not been a long quiet river. Its future was imperilled many times. This was the case in 2014, when the Swiss people accepted a federal popular initiative aiming at the restriction of foreign immigration. This referendum demanded the introduction of fixed quotas of residence permits for foreigners (including EU citizens) and of the principle of national preference on the labour market. This was a clear breach of one of the principal bilateral agreements, namely, the one on free movement of persons. In late 2016, after months of uncertainty, the Swiss parliament decided for a very soft implementation that would not go against the agreement though.

To elucidate this very special case, we have divided this study into several chapters. First, we will develop the main elements shedding light on the peculiarities of Swiss political Euroscepticism compared to the rest of Europe. In order to do this, we use the key conceptual contributions introduced in scientific literature to explain the phenomenon of Euroscepticism. Secondly, we will analyse the chain of events that brought Switzerland into this particular situation of relative
isolation. At that point, we emphasize the specificities of the identity-related, economic and institutional aspects shaping the foreign policy of this country. Thirdly, we will tackle the effects of the 2008–2009 economic crisis and the following slowdown in growth. Thereon, we find that – quite paradoxically – it is because Switzerland suffered very little, that its Euroscepticism increased and its relations with the EU deteriorated. Finally, in our fourth chapter, we will highlight the most important implications of the Swiss case for the suitability of the main theories explaining the phenomenon of Euroscepticism.

1. Compared with Other European Countries, Swiss Euroscepticism has a Distinctive Nature

The term “Euroscepticism” is a neologism often taking on a polysemic definition. It was first introduced in Great Britain in the early 1990s. At that time, political observers used the term to describe the development of a new sovereigntist group within the British Conservative Party (which rejected the Maastricht Treaty). Later, this term is used again. But this time, it defines different political realities in certain countries in mainland Europe.¹ Today, it has emancipated from its origins. The media in particular often use it to describe more or less any structured opposition to the EU. In this context, however, we shall define Euroscepticism more precisely, based on specialized academic contributions.

Scientific literature has developed several typologies and conceptualizations of Euroscepticism as a political phenomenon. These typologies are mainly based on observations of the behaviour of the main political powers of the EU member states and accession candidates from the beginning of the 1990s until today. One of the simplest conceptualizations is based on the “hard/soft” dichotomy. Primarily, it defines these parties’ positioning in relation to the question of EU membership. So-called “hard” Euroscepticism is defined as opposition in principle to any EU membership. Unfortunately, this is where the definition stops. It does not illuminate whether these Euroscpetic formations define a political alternative to EU membership (association agreements, bilateral treaties, a solitary path, etc.) nor even whether they have the vision of a European order differing from the one established by the EU.

Accordingly, “soft” Euroscepticism refers to contingent and less adamant criticism of the EU. This line is considered moderate criticism. It is often based on the perception that national interest contradicts the political development of the EU.²

Chris Flood has developed another scientific typology, which is a little more precise as it distinguishes six types of Euroscepticism clearly visible in the discourse of European political formations. Among them three are of particular interest. The first one is “rejectionism”. It is defined as opposition to any of the major European policies or, in its harshest form, to continued membership. Still, according to the author of this typology, these rejectionist parties are not necessarily opposed to the idea of building an integrated Europe. The study of their

discourse shows that most of them only reject the EU’s too ambitious or politi-
cized nature. The second one is built around the concept of “revisionism”. This is
less broad and less categorical than “rejectionism”. The revisionist’s main criti-
cisms focus on one or, at the most, several particular EU policies (for example,
the economic and monetary union). They plead for a European Union with a
lower level of integration. Finally, the third is defined as “minimalism”. The
Euro sceptic minimalists defend the status quo of integration and criticize the
irreversibility of the process of ever-deepening integration. Hence, none of these
conceptual approaches advocate for the end of integration leading to isolationism
or a solitary path.3

These authors’ contributions are particularly important because they facilitate
a better perception of Euroscepticism as a political phenomenon. Still, it is sig-
nificant that the samples these authors assess often overlook Western European,
non-EU member states (Norway, Iceland, Switzerland, etc.). One researcher very
justly comments that these scientific works deprive themselves of studying cases
which – due to their singularity – may well contribute to a better understanding
of the phenomenon of Euroscepticism.4

Applying these previously developed typologies, it is now possible to com-
pare the case of Switzerland with other European countries. According to Flood’s
conceptualization, the prevailing behaviours and attitudes of Swiss political
actors refer to a Euroscepticism of the “harsh”, rejectionist type. In fact, its nature
is so harsh that it is difficult to compare with the cases studied by Flood in vari-
ous other European countries.

As a matter of fact, a recent poll found that around 80 to 85% of the Swiss pop-
ulation believed that their country ought not to join the EU. Furthermore, the
results of such surveys have remained quite consistent over time. In fact, with
results between 68 and 85%, they show that rejection has hardly changed over
the last 10 years.5 This emphatic rejectionism is not only symptomatic of Swiss
public opinion. The major political forces’ manifestos and programs prove that
they are not disconnected from their voters at all. In fact, during the last 10 years,
many of these texts settled the issue of accession negatively.

Actually, in Switzerland, the main political divide between parties is not pro-
and anti-accession. As we will see later, even the few Swiss political actors con-
sidered as pro-European do not advocate full membership but rather one “with
exceptions”.

In fact, we have to go back at least 25 years in order to find a slightly different
situation. In 1992, just after the end of the Cold War, the Swiss government
applied to join the EU. Because the Swiss parliament had not voted on any such
measure, and no other political actors were consulted. Moreover, this application
request was soon shelved sine die (and even officially retracted in July 2016).
Meanwhile, by referendum, the Swiss people voted down accession to the Euro-

3 Chris Flood, “Euroscepticism: a Problematic Concept,” UACES 32nd Annual Conference, 7th
Research Conference Queen's University Belfast, September 2-4, 2002.
4 Marianne Sundsaker Skinnner, “Different Variety of Euroscepticism? Conceptualizing and
Explaining Euroscepticism in Western European Non-Member States,” Journal of Common
Market Studies, 5, 1, 2013, pp. 122-139.
5 Tibor Szücs and Andreas Wenger, Sicherheit 2014. Aussen-, Sicherheits- und Vertei-
digungspolitische Meinungsbildung im Trend, Zurich, Centre for Security Studies, ETH Zürich,
2014.
pean Economic Area (EEA) which was supposed to constitute one step before joining the EU. Later, the question of EEA or EU membership became a taboo subject.

The deeply rejectionist nature of the main Swiss political actors is thus undeniable. It must be compared with other European countries that are not EU members. First of all, a relevant comparison must focus on countries that - like Switzerland - specifically decided not to join the EU: Norway and Iceland.

The analysis of the Norwegian and Icelandic main political actors' attitudes and policies reveals characteristics differing somewhat from those of Switzerland. For example, polls show that in these countries, public opinion has a different perception of the accession issue. Presently, about 50% of the Icelanders and 70% Norwegians are against joining the EU. Surveys conducted over the years show that these results are quite stable even though, in both cases, rejection rates tend to rise. Furthermore, contrary to the Swiss case, several Norwegian and Icelandic parties still favour accession.

From a historical point of view, the political paths of these two countries are also different. We have to keep in mind that with the support of parliament, the Norwegian government had twice negotiated and signed an accession treaty to the EU (in 1972 and in 1994). The process of accession was only stopped in extremis because the Norwegian people declined to authorize ratification at two referenda with quite close results. In Iceland, too, the government had started accession negotiations in 2009. In 2015, a new majority expressed the desire to cancel them though.

Finally, it should also be recalled that both Norway and Iceland are members of the European Economic Area (EEA). Thus, their level of integration is much deeper than the Swiss one. The sectoral bilateral agreements presently linking Brussels and Bern cover fewer integration and cooperation areas.

In fact, the only European states - in the traditional geographic sense of the word - that could be considered as reluctant about EU-membership as Switzerland are Russia, Belarus, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. The governments of these countries have never indicated any long-term will to join the EU. However, it should be noted that these four countries are not liberal democracies where the population and the political parties are able to freely express their views on the


issue of European integration. This complicates any analysis of the phenomenon of Euroscepticism in their societies.

Finally, its singularity would raise fewer questions if Switzerland were more geographically isolated, i.e., on the edge of the major European flows of people, goods, capital, and services (such as the countries mentioned above). Most studies emphasize the total interdependence of Switzerland and its European neighbours. From a demographic, economic, or even a cultural or scientific perspective, Switzerland finds itself always right at the centre of Europe and not at its periphery. All this ought to have worked towards Switzerland fully entering or at least considering the possibility of joining the European Union. But this has never happened.

2. The Motivations of Swiss Rejectionism: An Interpretation

Why does Switzerland remain the only state of continental Europe that rejects accession even though it could join the EU without difficulty since it would, almost effortlessly, meet all the accession criteria? In order to answer this question, it is important to investigate the origins of this distrust which has lasted for many decades.

Below, we will analyse the Swiss reluctance about accession by presenting five factors explaining Switzerland’s rejectionist Euroscepticism: the weight of history, neutrality, (direct democracy, economic concerns and the Euroscepticism of the elites.

It goes without saying that these five factors are here differentiated for didactical reasons. In reality, they interact in a very complex way, creating a sense of exceptionalism very conducive to anti-Europeanism among a large part of the Swiss population. Furthermore, we have to underline that we use them essentially as tools for an interpretative analysis and not as theoretical explanations.

2.1 The weight of History

In various layers of society, the vicissitudes of history have forged a sense of exceptionalism which does not favour participation in a supranational community of states.

In their recent history, the Swiss have not experienced political traumas that could have made them reconsider their sovereigntist conceptions. For almost two centuries, they have endured neither an international conflict nor a civil war. Furthermore, they have not suffered the torments of authoritarianism or dictatorship. Switzerland remained untouched even in the darkest hours of European history. It also avoided foreign occupation. Finally, Switzerland was spared the traumas connected with the process of decolonization. In a nutshell: this country never suffered any of the major political dramas that affected almost every other country on the European continent over the last 200 years.

During that whole period, the Swiss political and institutional situation remained very stable. The constitutional order was always respected, and political crises were insignificant and rare.
This remarkable stability has had consequences on the Swiss economic climate. The Swiss economy has steadily maintained a relatively high level of prosperity (especially during the 20th century). More remarkable still, Switzerland has not experienced sudden economic upheavals like almost all its neighbours.

To a certain extent, this long period of political and economic stability also contributed to the sense of exceptionalism in Switzerland. Moreover, one period distinguishes itself by its decisive character in the development of Switzerland's exceptionalism: the Second World War. At that time, the Swiss Confederation emphasized its difference from its neighbouring countries by pursuing policies with strong patriotic tones. The external threats which were quite tangible between 1939 and 1945 (coming from both fascist Italy and Nazi Germany) contributed to the success of these policies and to the development of strong internal unity. This moment of national unity contrasts with the internal discord which prevailed during the First World War.

The turn of these events strengthened the sense of exceptionalism and legitimized a tendency towards isolationism. This tendency was reinforced even after the end of the conflict. In fact, Switzerland was the only country in Europe (together with Sweden) that went through this period of war without greatly impoverishing.11

During the post-war period (1945-1960), and to a certain extent during the whole Cold War, the Swiss government remained wary of the efforts to build a new international order around supra-national organizations. Contrary to concepts it had developed in 1919 in joining the League of Nations, the Federal Council, driven by the desire to prolong this new interior harmony, decided that Switzerland did not have to reconsider in any way its foreign policy. Therefore, it continued a largely sovereigntist and somewhat isolationist policy.

This political orientation had long-term effects on Swiss foreign politics. To a certain extent, these effects can still be felt today in the form of the phenomenon of historical inertia (path dependency).

2.2 Neutrality

It has often been stated that Switzerland’s accession to the EU would cause problems linked with the neutral status of this country. From an objective point of view, however, accession would not lead to the surrender of neutrality as defined in international law.

The principle of neutrality would not be threatened in the case of accession because the Union is not a military alliance like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) whose members are obliged to military solidarity should one of them be attacked by a third state.12 Besides, six EU member states are neutral and do not consider this to be incompatible with their status as member states.

---

In fact, by the Swiss government has itself acknowledged this legal argument. On a certain number of occasions, the Federal Council admitted that accession would not affect neutrality at all unless the EU was to develop a common defines policy tantamount to a military alliance. Nevertheless, many Swiss think that neutrality is embodied in prudent foreign policy (read: relative isolationism). Generally, they look favourably on the existence of international organizations. They are, however, more reserved about the question of whether their own country ought to be a member, especially, if these entities possess supra-national aspects or if they deal with questions of international security.13

One particular element has to be taken into special consideration in order to understand this attitude. According to many Swiss, neutrality has been a very important factor in the success of Swiss foreign policy for the past 200 years. Consequently, they consider it a principle of foreign policy comparable with a sort of timeless magic formula. This perspective differs widely from that of numerous political observers for whom – in the light of the post-Cold War political order in Europe – neutrality is an outdated concept.

Thus, it is no surprise that during the last decades, every opinion poll has shown that a large majority of Swiss remains attached to the principle of neutrality, and even to a rather restrictive interpretation of it. The most recent polls show that about 95% of the Swiss population support it in principle. This strong support has let some analysts assume that neutrality ought to be understood as a marker of Swiss identity.14

While the majority of Swiss attribute numerous benefits – chief among them having avoided the war –, it is helpful to remember that other peoples have drawn opposite conclusions. For example, immediately after the Second World War, the Dutch and the Belgians definitively rejected neutrality because it had not helped them avoid the aggression of Nazi Germany.15

2.3 Direct Democracy

Direct democracy constitutes another obstacle on the way to Switzerland’s integration into the EU. However, contrary to the other obstacles, this one can be considered as a “real problem” because it poses practical, political questions.

Presently, no country has a practice of direct democracy as developed and that permeates the functioning of its institutions as profoundly as Switzerland. In fact, the Swiss population regularly votes on many political issues including those that touch on international affairs. Such a system, unique in the world, does indeed result in certain consequences. Above all, it produces severe constraints on Switzerland’s European policy.

We shall depict these constraints in the following three sub-sections.

2.3.1 Swiss Direct Democracy and the So-Called “Double Majority” Rule

Articles 140 and 142 of the Swiss Constitution require the organization of a double majority referendum in the case of joining a supranational community (EU, NATO, etc.). In other words, accession to the EU requires the approval not only of the simple majority of the population, but also the majority of the population in the majority of the 23 cantons and semi-cantons of the Swiss confederation.

Since the most isolationist segments of the population are concentrated in the numerous (sparsely) populated rural and traditionalist cantons, a “super majority” of around 55% of the population on the national level would be necessary to overcome the compulsory requirement of the majority of the cantons. This constitutes a major practical difficulty.\textsuperscript{16}

2.3.2 Accession Would Have Effects on the Ambit of Direct Democracy

By joining the EU, Bern would transfer certain legislative competences to Brussels and would be committed not to apply those that remained if they contradicted applicable European law. In concrete terms, this would imply the intrinsic restriction of the field of application of Swiss direct democracy wherever the EU regulates directly applicable standards.\textsuperscript{17}

The extent of this limitation due to the incompatibility of European legislation has been estimated at about 14% of the topics submitted to the Swiss people and cantons at referenda and other popular initiatives during the 1990s. Based on these results, it is difficult to draw conclusions because much the Swiss and European legislative processes may vary over time.\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, they give an idea of the importance this restriction might have should Switzerland join.

2.3.3 Direct Democracy also has a Strong Identitarian Dimension.

Direct democracy is one of the essential components of the national identity of a country that shares neither a common language nor culture or religion. It constitutes an efficient political tool to integrate numerous communities whose structure differs, especially concerning language, culture and social aspects.

In fact, due to the federal nature of Switzerland, the numerous referenda regularly punctuating Swiss political life are practically the only moments when the different constituent parts of the country can discuss and decide together. Furthermore, these votes greatly contribute to the formation of a distinctive, Swiss public space. They also perform the function of political cohesion contributing to the recuperation and pacification of the new claimant forces that regularly emerge on the Swiss political scene.

In this context, any reduction of the fields of application of direct democracy (see below) is often perceived very negatively in Switzerland.

\textsuperscript{16} René SCHWOK, Suisse-Union européenne, l'adhésion impossible?, op. cit., 2015.
2.4 Economic Apprehension

Many citizens also consider accession a threat to the economic interests of their country. Furthermore, contrary to most European peoples, many Swiss are not convinced of the economic benefits of European integration. Therefore, they expect hardly any economic advantages in the case of accession.

This conviction has existed in Switzerland for a long time. Studies of the 1990s already indicate its prevalence in Swiss public opinion. They also show that respondents do not base this widely shared view on a cold and rational economic evaluation. Actually, they are incapable of explaining in detail the possible disadvantage for the economic situation if Switzerland were to join the EU. They often content themselves with referring to “common sense” while underlining that Switzerland is already prosperous in spite of not being an EU member state.20

Arguably, should Switzerland join, from a financial point of view, it would certainly become one of the net contributing members of the EU budget. According to the latest disposable data, its contribution would amount to 4 billion Euros per year compared to the 500 million due through the bilateral treaties.21

Still, an objective economic analysis has shown that accession would also have positive economic effects for Switzerland that would, in all likelihood, far outweigh the additional expenses mentioned above. Actually, Switzerland’s GDP could gain several additional tenths of a point should the country chose the path of accession rather than that of bilateralism.22

This gap between the economic notions of a large part of Swiss society and objective reasoning is difficult to analyse. Still, at least partly, it may be attributed to the strong performance of the Swiss economy since 1945. Enjoying high wages due to high levels of productivity and lack of human capital, the Swiss often have a hard time finding the EU economically attractive.

2.5 The Euroscepticism of the Elites

2.5.1 The Most Eurosceptic Employers in Europe

One of the specific features of Switzerland’s case is the fact that a large majority of Swiss employers have always been rejectionist - even more so today than during the preceding decades. This situation is a sort of enigma. Several studies show that in every European country that recently joined the EU, this socio-professional group constituted the spearhead of membership advocates.23

Obviously, the opposition of employers is particularly strong in sectors less competitive on the international markets (like agriculture). Indeed, they largely

benefit from Switzerland’s protectionist politics. In the case of accession, they fear the reconsideration of their privileges. In fact, especially concerning rules and regulations, they would be placed on equal terms with their more competitive rivals within the interior market of the EU.

The genuine uniqueness of the case of Swiss employers is the fact that the most competitive and globalized economic sectors (services) are also rather Eurosceptic. Yet, they would enjoy every advantage should Switzerland join the EU. Membership would provide them with better access to the European market than the bilateral treaties currently in force.

This specificity is a result of the fact that a large part of this globalized sector profits from the differences of legislation between the EU and Switzerland. Multinationals, banks, and insurance companies have transformed Switzerland into a haven of special legislations. In the case of accession, they fear Bern will enter a gear of European regulatory interventionism that could jeopardize their prosperity.24

The issue of the value added tax is also regularly raised by a section of employers. Indeed, in the case of accession, Switzerland would be obliged to introduce the minimal VAT currently in force within the EU. Consequently, the “standard” Swiss rate of 8% would practically double to 15%. In the same way, the “reduced” rate would also take a leap from 2.4% to 5%. Quite obviously, such fiscal changes would constitute a significant burden for many Swiss economic actors.

In other respects, Swiss employers do not want accession because they would also lose some of their influence on Swiss politics.

In Switzerland, political authorities systematically consult employers, especially during the so-called “pre-parliamentary” legislative phase.25 Thus, they benefit from more impact on public affairs than many of their counterparts in the other European capitals and in Brussels.

Another source of influence is provided by the possibility for the employers to exploit direct democracy as a strategic or tactical instrument to defend their political interests.

2.5.2 No Political Party is truly in Favour of Accession

For many years, none of the Swiss political formations have openly advocated for accession. In fact, only the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) considers such an option possible, but only in the long run and under certain conditions.

This timid Socialist position is essentially motivated by the dynamics of Swiss interior politics. The SP tries to compensate its structural electoral weakness (around 20% at the last elections) using the perspective of accession to shake the defenders of the status quo. This way, it attempts to put certain social issues on the legislative agenda that it has been promoting for a long time.

Still, the SP is now confronted with several internal Eurosceptic currents. As a consequence, its leadership generally expresses its Europhilia only sotto voce. If the SP officially supports accession, it does so on its own terms. Indeed, some of

its leaders regularly criticize the lack of protection of workers in the EU member countries. In the case of accession negotiations, they would demand the introduction of guarantees against possible wage dumping into Swiss law. Based on the typologies of Euroscepticism developed at the beginning of this contribution, we characterize this position of Euroscepticism as revisionist.

Another original feature of the Swiss case is the fact that the centre-right parties are less Europhile than the centre and centre-left ones. This political configuration may not be unique, but it is rather rare in Europe. Thus, for many years, the Christian Democratic People's Party (CDP) and the Free Democratic (or Radical Democratic) Party FDP, two pillars of the centre-right have refused to make an official statement on EU accession. Both parties are convinced that it is not a realistic perspective for Switzerland. Thus, both of them answer the classic criteria of rejectionism. Recently, several members of these parties distinguished themselves by delivering particularly Europhobic statements. They were even the driving forces behind the withdrawal of the Swiss request for membership, though frozen since 1992, in order to “clarify things”.26

Undoubtedly, the most rejectionist party of the political spectrum is the Swiss People’s Party (SVP). It is this formation, too, which receives the most votes at general elections: almost 30% at the October 2015 national elections. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the SVP has been able to monopolize the field of direct democracy launching several, sometimes surprisingly successful referenda.

Today, the SVP is no longer the Peasants’ Party it used to be. Instead, it is a populist formation capable of constantly enlarging its electoral base. Its argumentative matrix centres on sovereignty, often with xenophobic and above all, Europhobic accents.

This political positioning made numerous SVP members demand the termination of the bilateral treaty on the free movement of persons (the implementation of their anti-immigration initiative would collide with the obligations of this treaty). However, such a denunciation would endanger the whole bilateral approach and risk forcing Switzerland to a national solo effort (Alleingang) against the EU. It seems that a part of the Swiss population is on this wavelength: according to a recent poll, 45% of the Swiss share this opinion.27

Comparisons between political parties of different countries are always difficult. Still, the SVP’s Euroscepticism may be considered sui generis. This party is without doubt more rejectionist that some Eurosceptic parties par excellence, like the French Front national (FN) or the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). In fact, the FN as well as UKIP called Switzerland’s bilateral approach a model for their countries.28

However, and this is a fundamental difference with the FN and UKIP, the SVP is an integral part of the Swiss political system and participates in every Swiss political institution (on the local, cantonal, and federal levels). Thus, for almost a century and without interruption, SVP members have been members of the Fede-

eral Council. Furthermore, the party is less demonised by the other political formations and media in Switzerland than the FN in France or UKIP in Britain. As it started to radicalize and develop populist strategies in the 1990s it remained part of what ought to be called the “Swiss establishment”.

3. The Paradoxical Effects of the 2008–2009 Economic Crisis

In the previous sections, it has become quite clear that the principal Swiss actors’ (economic world, people, political parties, etc.) Euroscepticism is deep-seated and ancient. However, it is also obvious that it has gotten stronger in recent years. In the following section, we will develop an original thesis to account for this phenomenon.

As we have seen, Swiss Euroscepticism is challenging the habitual conceptual framework. Both the long history and the extent of this Euroscepticism are striking, but these are not its only particularities. The Swiss case is also unique because it does not follow the “classic” mechanism depicted by a part of the scientific literature devoted to the study of Euroscepticism. More precisely, Swiss scientific literature has not been able to observe the conventional gears according to which the pauperization of large social groups almost automatically results in votes for anti-EU political parties.

Observing the economic performance of Switzerland, the unemployment rate, the levels of personal satisfaction, etc., and comparing it with the evolution of anti-European feeling in Switzerland, one reality emerges quite fast: there is no correlation between these two factors. The SVP’s electoral power and the level of rejectionism measured by polls have not evolved in response to Switzerland’s economic strength.

As regards the conditions, we can also observe that Switzerland was hardly touched by the deterioration of the economic situation which has affected Europe since 2008. On the contrary, its growth has remained relatively strong in spite of the soaring of the Swiss Franc on the currency exchange markets. Unemployment has remained very low, at around 3% of the work force. A study of the World Economic Forum continuously considered Switzerland the most competitive country in the world from 2009 to 2015. By all standards, these figures are remarkable. If one takes them into account, no other European country has withstood the crisis so well.

Paradoxically, this relative prosperity had a reinforcing effect upon Swiss Euroscepticism.

3.1. The Issue of Migration as a Catalyst for Euroscepticism (and for a New Instability between the EU and Switzerland)

Because of a complex chain of reactions, Switzerland still faced constraints in the aftermath of the 2008–2009 crisis. Actually, quite against its own intentions, the resilience of its prosperity attracted an even greater number of European immigrants than before.

In 2001, shortly before the agreement on the free movement of persons between Switzerland and the EU entered into force, Bern estimated the net effect of immigration would be around 8,000 persons per year only. These figures were accurate when they were been estimated. At that point, the difference between the European and the Swiss economic situations was marginal. Thus, the liberalization of work-related immigration would not have produced a great impact.

In the meantime however, things have changed a lot. By the end of 2013, net migration rose to 89,500 persons (due to the freedom of movement, about 70% of them are immigrants from the EU). In relation to the Swiss population (8.2 million inhabitants) and by European standards, this represents a significant population growth.

The reason for the increase in immigration is the following: since 2007–2008, the European economic situation has become lacklustre while the fundamentals of the Swiss economy stayed relatively healthy. Thus, many Europeans were able to find a job in Switzerland when they could no longer hope for one at home. This situation was reinforced by the fact that during this period, Swiss salaries increased significantly while incomes stagnated or even decreased in several European countries.

Consequently, this influx of people provided a platform for the launching and, in fact, the approval of several referenda used by isolationist movements, especially the SVP, to occupy the Swiss political scene and impose their agenda. In addition to being indicators of the strengthening of Euroscepticism among the Swiss population, these political events have caused lasting damage to the relations between Switzerland and the EU.

As we have already mentioned, on February 9, 2014, 50.3% of the voters approved of an anti-immigration initiative launched by the SVP. It demanded the introduction of quotas for immigration and the introduction of the national preference rule. During the campaign, the initiators argued that it was necessary to reduce the negative effects of immigration on Switzerland, for example the strain on the infrastructure, and to make it easier for Swiss people to find a job on a highly competitive job market.

After the surprising result (a large part of the Swiss political and economic establishment had fought it), the already complex bilateral relations between Switzerland and the EU turned into a serious political headache. Effectively, this referendum incorporated into the federal constitution (art. 121a) a rule according to which the number of residence permits issued to non-nationals must be limited by ceilings and an annual quota. But such a provision is absolutely incompatible with the terms of the agreement on the free movement of persons implemented by the EU and Switzerland since 2002.

Bern and Brussels had to find a solution for this incompatibility before February 2017. This task was too arduous. Indeed, the EU repeatedly stated that it would not renegotiate this bilateral treaty and that it would not accept Switzerland introducing an immigration quota. After a while, Brussels even increased the pressure by refusing to conclude new bilateral agreements, even provisional ones, as long as the Swiss did not present guarantees for maintaining the free

movement of persons. This new tension constituted a turning point in the bilateral relations between Switzerland and the EU because until 2014, they were characterized by a certain stability.

Switzerland’s position soon became untenable. The Swiss government could not unilaterally violate the agreement on free movement, as that would put in danger several other important bilateral agreements. Indeed, the six market-access agreements were linked to Switzerland respecting free movement (in accordance with the so-called “guillotine clause” the EU imposed on Switzerland shortly before the signing of the first package of bilateral agreements). If these bilateral accords were to be called into question, Switzerland would find itself in a position of economic marginalization unprecedented since the 1990s. Consequently, the Swiss Parliament backtracked and decided to implement the initiative in a very light manner (through soft measures of national preference on the Swiss job market).

Even if it does not seem obvious at first glance, the initiative against mass immigration had a specifically Eurosceptic component. In fact, it was aimed at EU immigration without clearly naming it. This is due to the fact that non-European immigration was already subjected to a very strict annual quota. Besides, non-Europeans have already been discriminated against on the job market by the application of the national preference rule.

The political conduct of the Swiss population at this referendum is hard to explain. The arguments put forward by the authors of the initiative stressing practical difficulties due to the substantial immigration from the EU (stress on infrastructure, increasing competition in the job market, salary dumping, etc.) seem to have paid off. Indeed, according to a study released immediately after the poll, it seems that these two arguments were well received by the population and influenced the result of the vote.31

However, the geography of this vote shows that, paradoxically, it was the Swiss regions with the highest immigration rates and, at the same time, facing a phenomenon of saturation of the public infrastructure and higher unemployment rates that voted against the initiative. The regions least affected by these problems clearly voted in favor of the introduction of an immigration quota. These different elements suggest that identitarian explanations (like the defines of traditions, rejection of international openness etc.) may also be relevant to explain this anti-immigration vote.32

The geography of the vote also enables us to identify an important aspect of Swiss Euroscepticism. It reveals the existence of divisions Swiss political scientists consider “traditional” at referenda on European issues or on foreign policy questions in general. These are twofold: linguistic (between Francophones and Germanophones/Italophones) and geographic (between urban and rural communities). Thus, the majority of Germanophone and Italophone communities voted in favour of limiting immigration.33 In contrast, francophone Switzerland clearly voted against it. At the same time, the large cities (including those in

32 Ibid.
German-speaking Switzerland) rejected the proposition while numerous Swiss peri-urban areas, small towns and rural regions (in the French-speaking part, too) voted in favour.

In the long term, the 2008-2009 crisis had an impact on the strengthening of the Swiss rejectionist forces. The surprising acceptance of the initiative against mass immigration in 2014 tends to prove it. This strengthening is linked with reasons much more complex than the one given by classic socio-economic analysis. Contrary to other European states, it is not the slowing down of the economic situation, but rather Switzerland’s solid economic performance, which has fuelled anti-immigration feelings and, by extension, an increase of Euroscepticism and the deterioration of the relations with the EU.

4. Implications of the Swiss Case for the Theories of International Relations and the European Integration

In this section, we will consider to what extent the case of Switzerland is atypical from a different perspective, namely, the academic theories. In fact, the Swiss case tends to question, and maybe even challenge numerous theoretical approaches used by political scientists. Since we cannot deal with all of them here, we shall focus on three of them.

4.1 The neo-Realist Approach (Theory of International Relations)

The neo-realist current of international relations theory has often suggested that the pronounced Euroscepticism of some Western European countries (like Switzerland, Sweden, Austria, and Finland) was primarily linked to the characteristics of the Cold War. In fact, this current considers the bi-polar equilibrium between the Soviet and Western powers as an important factor in explaining the conduct of these recalcitrant countries. It underlines that the EU was essentially designed as an economic construction intended to reinforce the power of the Western European countries in their confrontation with the communist countries.\(^{34}\)

During the Cold War, Finland and Austria had been led to develop rejectionist policies essentially because of their neutralization by the Soviet bloc. This neutralization had taken place with the tacit consent of the West.\(^{35}\) The non-participation of Sweden and Switzerland in the process of European integration was not the result of an exogenous neutralization but rather it had a geopolitical dimension because their neutrality contributed to the preservation of the balance of power between the two blocs in the north and in the centre of Europe.\(^{36}\)


In other words, the neo-realist approach assumed a causal link between the configuration of the international balance of power and the state Euroscepticism of some European countries.

One of the principal contributions of neo-realism is to underline the undeniable impact of the international system’s global evolution on the participation in the building of Europe. Today, it is widely accepted that the end of the East-West confrontation increased the freedom of action of the neutral European states and gave them incentives to approach and, in the end, join the EU. This is the case especially with Finland, whose foreign policy was constrained by the geopolitical configuration. This Nordic country filled an application and joined the EU right after the end of the cold War. The timing seems to confirm the relevance of the neo-realist explanation.  

Still, an approach reducing the explanation to the dynamics of the international balance of power collides with the Swiss case. In fact, the end of the Cold War had hardly any effect on the intensity of Switzerland’s rejectionism in the short and medium term. Although in 1992, there was some movement in government towards the EU, the rejection in December 1992 of the referendum on joining the European Economic Area (EEA) quickly put an end to this. Since then, as we have seen, the situation has remained unchanged and the principal Swiss political actors categorically exclude any possible accession to the EU.

4.2 The Federalist Approach (Theories of European Integration)

Switzerland’s obstinate rejectionism also poses serious problems for the basic theories of European integration, especially federalism. Generally speaking, this approach postulates that a pan-European political organization based on a federal and supranational rationale is a necessity because it is intrinsically more efficient (both economically and politically). More precisely, it must prevail over the others because every other form of governance is considered less rational in organizational terms and, especially, less favourable for the preservation of peace in Europe.

Based on the founding fathers of European integration’s goal to create “an ever closer union”, the federalist approach proposes a constitutional structure of the European Union quite similar to states like the United States, Germany, and especially, Switzerland.

In fact, the Swiss Confederation is often presented by a number of federalists as a model because it is based on a specific federal structure (polycentric) and history has proven it to be stable and efficient concerning its capacity to solve complex political problems.

In spite of the development of European integration in accordance with federally inspired principles like subsidiarity and proportionality, and regardless of a federal future based on the Swiss model sometimes promised to/by the EU, the

---


Confederation persists in its refusal to join. Thus, this country, though federalist 
par excellence, does not accept the virtues of the federalist future of European in-
tegration.
This is a new paradox. Switzerland remains indifferent to a European con-
struction endeavouring to develop a more and more federal and de-centralized 
system even though it has used it skilfully and patiently for centuries.

4.3 Theory of the Economic and Monetary Integration

The Swiss case also challenges some theories developed in the field of political 
economy, like the theory of economic integration, which claims that there is an 
economic logic prompting the European states to join the EU.
According to this approach, EU membership is intrinsically profitable for 
European states because it brings about the abolition of tariff barriers and the 
creation of a single market which fosters economic prosperity in its member 
states. More precisely, the implementation of this market has essentially three 
positive effects on the activity of its economic operators: it stimulates competition 
between them; it enables them to exploit economies of scale; and it gives them 
the opportunity to specialize in the fields where they have potential comparative 
advantages.

These effects are sufficient to largely explain the European countries’ similarity 
of preferences favouring economic aspects of integration. According to some 
researchers, it is only in the case where the interests of the economic actors are so 
“weak, vague, and indeterminate” that the path of accession is not considered a 
worthwhile option. Due to Switzerland’s imbrication in the European economic 
flows and, especially, its dependence on the EU internal market, this seems diffi-
cult to argue.

On the other hand, this approach emphasizes an important point: small Euro-
pean states like Switzerland ought to be even more inspired to join the EU. They 
are more dependent on international markets than others. Their internal markets 
are too small to sell their own products to. Thus, they are more likely to benefit 
from the effects of the comprehensive and deep free trade provided by European 
integration. In addition, some economists refer to a “domino effect” according 
to which each EU enlargement expands the interior market and automatically 
provokes further enlargements in return. Besides the increase in economies of 
 scale, the EU enlargement imposes new discriminations on third-country export-
ers.

It is true that Switzerland’s bilateral agreements with the EU allow the Swiss 
economic operators to access the EU internal market indiscriminately. Still, this 
access is not complete, and certain sectors of the Swiss economy would like their 
country to deepen its integration through more bilateral agreements (for instance

41 Andrew Moravcsik, The Choice for Europe. Social Purpose and State Power from Messina to Maa-
tracht, Cornell, Cornell University Press, 199).
Department, 1988.
43 Richard Baldwin, “A Domino Theory of Regionalism,” NBER Working Paper 4465, Cam-
in areas that cover issues such as the Cassis de Dijon principle) which the EU refused.

Introducing another aspect, some researchers insist on the importance of growth to understand the accession policy of the European countries. According to them, countries whose GDP growth rates had lagged behind those of the EU for a longer time, tended to join. This explanation was suggested in order to understand the wave of accession of members of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) between 1970 and 1990.44

Switzerland, like most EFTA countries, also knew a long period of weaker economic growth than the EU (between 1980 and 2000, to be precise). However, this did not induce it to join.

In sum, these economic theories collide with the realities of the Swiss case. In fact, this Alpine country possesses every characteristic that ought to push it towards accession from the point of view of the economic rationality we just described (size, presence of many exporting and interdependent economies, growth differential) and yet it has not.

Conclusion

Since February 9, 2014, the relations between Switzerland and the European Union have changed in nature. Even if the Swiss government decided to preserve the bilateral agreements with Switzerland, Switzerland’s Euroscepticism is on the rise.

In this context of exacerbated Euroscepticism, no Swiss political actor of any importance dares to speak about the prospect of accession any longer. This topic remains taboo in the Swiss public sphere. There is no indication that this situation might change in the short or even medium term. This has nothing to do with the discussions prevailing in other EU member or non-member states. For example, in Switzerland, somebody qualifies as “pro-European” when he/she favours the type of relationship with the EU promoted by political formations often qualified as very Eurosceptic, like the FN or UKIP. As we have seen, the phenomenon of Swiss Euroscepticism is based on a multitude of complex and interconnected factors ingrained in the history of this small alpine country situated simultaneously in the centre and on the fringes of political Europe.

Because of the paradoxical effects of the economic crisis in 2008-2009, this ancient Euroscepticism, deeply rooted in the Swiss psyche, seems to have developed into a more radical form. This type of Euroscepticism has not been categorized/identified/studied yet in the scientific literature specialized in the study of anti-Europeanism. Therefore, new research needs to be conducted to better conceptualize it. Finally, in the last section of this study, we have shown that, to a large extent, the persistence the Swiss Confederation has shown in its refusal to join the EU is inconsistent with the explanations advanced by the major theories of the different scientific approaches concerned with European integration.

This Swiss “uniqueness” tends to make visible the theoretical approaches’ limitations in explaining the phenomenon of European integration. They should

perhaps be adjusted (all the more because most of them are quite old). To do this, we consider a theoretical study that takes into account Swiss domestic policy’s Euroscepticism as well as its recent development as necessary.

From our point of view, this work of readjustment ought to investigate the contributions of constructivist theory with a particular focus on the importance of building a nation state’s identity and the way it has developed its Euro-integration policies. The latter would be useful to establish a theoretical framework more suitable for understanding the Swiss case (and maybe other European cases such as Britain). It is encouraging that some signs seem to indicate that the scientific literature has now decided to turn its attention to the atypical cases of rejectionist Euroscepticism, like Norway.

---

**LE PAYS LE PLUS RETICENT PAR RAPPORT A L’INTEGRATION EUROPEENNE**

La Suisse est un cas unique dans sa réticence à adhérer à l’Union européenne. En effet, tous les gouvernements et parlements d’Europe ont au moins une fois dans leur histoire cherché à en devenir membre. Ce n’est pas le cas de la Suisse qui n’a jamais entamé de négociations d’adhésion et qui n’entend pas le faire prochainement. Actuellement le débat se situe entre les partisans du maintien d’accords bilatéraux avec l’UE et les rejectionnistes qui sont même prêts à y renoncer. Ainsi, paradoxalement, les eurosceptiques britanniques, qui ont érigé en modèle les accords bilatéraux Suisse-UE Suisse, apparaîtraient en Suisse comme des intégrationnistes. Pour éclairer ce cas très particulier, ce chapitre se base sur une grille d’analyse composée de plusieurs niveaux d’explications (historique, politique et économique). Les résultats obtenus démontrent que les théories politologues de l’euroscepticisme ne sont pas suffisamment développées pour expliquer ce phénomène helvétique.

---

**DAS AM MEISTEN ZAUDERNDEN LAND IN BEZUG AUF EUROPAISCHE INTEGRATION**


---


die britischen Euroskeptiker, deren Leitbild die bilateralen Abkommen zwischen der Schweiz und der EU sind, in der Schweiz Integrationisten. Um diesen ganz speziellen Fall genauer zu untersuchen, nutzt diese Studie eine Analysemethode mit mehreren Erklärungsansätzen (historisch, politisch und ökonomisch). Die erzielten Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die politikwissenschaftlichen Thesen zum Euroskeptizismus nicht entwickelt genug sind, um das helvetische Phänomen zu erklären.