

Xenophobic referendum defeated in Switzerland

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On the last Sunday in September voters in Switzerland defeated a referendum calling for “the regulating of immigration.” By a clear majority, 63.7 percent of those who voted said no to a halt in immigration.

The rejection of this xenophobic initiative was particularly high in all areas with an above average proportion of foreign residents, and particularly in the western Swiss cantons of Geneva, Waadt, Neuenburg and Jura, where approximately three-quarters voted “no”. In Geneva, where over 76 percent rejected the “foreigners out” proposal, a third of residents do not possess a Swiss passport.

The referendum required that “the proportion of foreign citizens resident in Switzerland should not exceed 18 percent of the population”. The ratio today is 19.3 percent. One might ask whether this particularly high figure in comparison with the European average denotes an unusual openness regarding immigration into Switzerland. The opposite, however, is the case. Swiss naturalisation policy is so lengthy, expensive and riddled with obstacles that those of foreign nationality usually remain precisely that for generations, i.e., foreigners.

Refugees who request asylum in Switzerland have a particularly difficult time finding accommodation. On average, only 5.8 percent are recognised as liable for asylum; the remainder must leave the country as quickly as possible or face deportation.

On the other hand, due to low tax levels, Switzerland is—after Luxembourg where foreigners make up 34.1 percent of the population—the second most attractive country in Europe for the wealthy and entrepreneurs. “With a rate of 25.1 percent in 1999, Switzerland offers the lowest taxation for business of all the most important economic locations,” was the jubilant message found on an official information web site for enterprises seeking to locate there. After concluding contracts with the European Union, their jubilation increased even further: “The bilateral agreement between Switzerland and the European Union is wrapped up!” they wrote. “Switzerland has become even more attractive for foreign investors!” Foreign entrepreneurs are obviously desirable. The double standard can already be seen.

The “18 percent initiative” quite openly divided immigrants into categories according to their usefulness for the “economy”. In the text of the referendum can be read: “To be taken into account in the calculation are particularly settlers, those with a yearlong visa, recognised asylum-seekers and foreigners who have been granted residency on humanitarian grounds. Short-term visitors with or without gainful employment will be taken in account if their stay lasts more than eight months, is renewed and when they are granted permission to bring other family members.... Not included in the calculation are illegal immigrants, seasonal workers without any family, members of international organisations, members of consular and diplomatic services, qualified scientists and leading business personnel, artists, those coming for recuperation, exchange students, foreign students and pupils as well as tourists.”

The distinction between “useful” foreigners and those who are regarded as a burden could not be clearer. In contrast to high-level business

personnel and researchers “normal” workers should have unrestricted access only if they stay in the country “for a short period” and come “without family members”. This would restore the particularly brutal status of seasonal workers, for which Switzerland was once notorious.

The disturbing fact remains that such a referendum was able to win the support of 36.3 percent of the voters for an unconcealed anti-foreigner and anti-working-class initiative. In some inner Swiss cantons almost 50 percent voted for it (Schwyz, 48 percent; Aargau, 47 percent). Despite the explosive nature of the issue, participation was 44.7 percent, only slightly above the usual (40.7 percent participated on average in the last 10 referenda), which means that not even every second voter felt it necessary to express an opinion.

The answer to this question lies in the arguments of the two sides: Although the government, parties, business and the media unanimously called for a no vote, not a single one of them tackled the issue from a principled humane political standpoint. Those opposing the referendum argued exclusively on the basis of what was good for Switzerland and thus in the final analysis did not substantially differ from the arguments of those supporting the initiative.

The referendum was initiated by the liberal democratic parliamentary deputy Philipp Mueller from Aargau and was supported by other individual politicians as well as the right-wing “Swiss democrats” and “Lega dei ticinesi”. The right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP), which won so many votes in last year's parliamentary elections with their demagogic party chief Christoph Blocher, was split. The business magnate and multimillionaire Blocher and his party leadership opposed the 18 percent initiative, but they were unable to get the genie they had released back into the bottle. The SVP delegate conference in Geneva decided to recommend a yes vote.

Federal President Adolf Ogi, also an SVP member, explained that acceptance of the 18 percent initiative would have negative consequences for the economy and for foreign relations. He said it was “inhuman and not practicable”. The predominant majority of the measure's opponents argued along the same lines as Ogi, that it was not in the interest of Switzerland, its international relations and its internationally operating economy to introduce rigid immigration controls at present. To project a xenophobic image would not be opportune at the present moment, they contended.

These arguments were also partially adopted by the “Committee for a tolerant Switzerland”, which considers itself left-wing. Those belonging to this committee included both the Social Democrats and Young Socialists, as well as the Greens, the trade unions, immigrant organisations and “Solidarité sans frontières” (Solidarity without Borders). Although this committee published some critical articles, its representatives expressly supported the arguments of the government and business associations. Berne Young Socialists national committee member Ursula Wyss wrote, “an acceptance of the initiative would not only be a xenophobic signal, it would also endanger the bilateral contracts with the

European Union, and would push Swiss foreign and economic policy offside.”

The Liberal Democratic Party (FDP), the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), trade and business associations such as “Vorort”, the bourgeois conservative newspaper *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ)—all had suddenly discovered how much the Swiss economy and society owes to foreigners. Almost daily the NZZ carried detailed reports about hospitals, building sites, old people's homes and multinational companies which would not function at all without foreign workers. “Foreigners are of above average industriousness, help to absorb conjunctural economic fluctuations and pay more into the public coffers than they receive in return,” Christoph Wehrli wrote September 8 in the NZZ.

The discussion in the bourgeois press became openly cynical when it dealt with questions such as why a high proportion of foreigners did not represent a burden for the environment, or how to deal with the damage to Swiss children who attended school alongside foreign children traumatised by civil war.

Up and down the country, prominent figures such as Alois Bischofberger, chief economist of the Credit Suisse, and Peter Hasler, director of the Swiss employers' association, announced how useful some foreigners could be for the positive growth of the economy, and to help finance the Swiss pensions system. Any negative effects which allegedly inevitably accompany the presence of people without a Swiss passport could be controlled much better by parliamentary measures, by a new more subtly formulated aliens act, than by the clumsy 18 percent limit, they argued.

For example, in the course of a public debate with a proponent of the initiative Hasler explained: “For us it's about not having any problems with foreigners, but at the same time having sufficient employees for the needs of the economy. On the one hand we want foreigners to be well integrated, living together amicably. That does not happen in all areas, we are completely united on that. That is a problem, which must be solved. But to write a number into the constitution ... is a stupidity.... We could no longer decide freely about meeting the demand for foreign workers and other immigrants.... We want to stop emigration from countries outside the EU, limiting it to highly qualified people.... We fear that it would be catastrophic for Switzerland's economic situation if one no longer had the liberty to look for workers where they are located.... We understand the uneasiness concerning criminality and the abuse of asylum rights.... Also the fact that in the sphere of asylum we are often dealing with those seeking to escape for economic reasons, is well known to us. But those are problems which we cannot solve with this initiative.... In jobs that are dirty, noisy and physically arduous, we are dependent on unqualified foreigners.”

Such contributions must cause great confusion for the unsophisticated reader. Are these supposed to be counter-arguments to this xenophobic initiative? Where is the talk about defending foreign colleagues? Who is representing whose interests in all this?

The divided attitude of the Swiss bourgeoisie towards the right-wing extremists is not the result of any liberal democratic principles, but arises from the increasing impossibility of uniting global economic interests with traditional nationalism.

The special political position of neutrality, which accompanied and shielded the rapid ascent of the Swiss economy in the first half of the twentieth century and the gigantic increase in the wealth of its banks, was transfigured into the nationalist myth of an armed “free Swiss confederation” repelling everything foreign. As the Bergier report detailed earlier this year, it was this form of national self-affirmation which led to Jewish refugees being turned back at Switzerland's border in 1942-43, under the pretext that the “boat was full”. At the same time, the Swiss banks hoarded the funds of both the culprits and the victims, becoming immeasurably richer themselves in the process.

But today, in view of a globalised world market, and the introduction of the euro throughout Europe, it has become impossible to preserve Switzerland's isolated special position any longer. And while the gnomes of Zurich, business magnates and federal politicians all push to open the country up internationally, and call for membership of the EU and UN, they come into ever-sharper conflict with the political forces of the extreme right.

Thus in the last years the activities of the swollen ranks of the Swiss extremist right-wing subculture, spreading fear and anxiety in villages and run-down suburbs, have become intolerable. Attacks on young people, left-wingers and above all people with dark skin are already on the agenda. In Berne in July the shared house “Solterpolter” was attacked and fired on with live ammunition. In St. Gallen, a group of skinheads attacked Africans waiting outside the “African club”. Bourgeois public opinion reacted with embarrassment when snarling skinheads disrupted the traditional speech on the occasion of the Swiss national holiday on August 1 by parliamentary deputy Klaus Villiger on the historic Rütli Meadow.

Establishment politicians and the media breathed a sigh of relief when it became clear that the xenophobic referendum had not gained a majority. The leading employers' association “economiesuisse” commented a few hours after the initiative's rejection that acceptance would have caused great damage “both to the economy and the image of Switzerland”.

On the same day, the NZZ encouraged the government that with the planned total revision of the aliens act “after more than 30 years they were taking the matter into their own hands and would no longer have to make policy on immigrations under the periodic pressure of dangerous initiatives [like the recent referendum]”. Law Minister Ruth Metzler (CVP) promised that the no vote would not mean free passage for unrestricted immigration.

Immigrants, refugees and Swiss workers can only regard such views as a declaration of war. Already today Swiss policy on immigration counts among the most reactionary systems in Europe, and the methods that are employed represent a threat to fundamental democratic rights.

A few days before the “foreigners out” vote, the Federal Office for Refugees (BFF) published figures showing that of 53,000 Kosovan refugees in Switzerland almost 32,000 had been forced to return home by the end of August. An employee of the Swiss Refugee Aid revealed the ruthlessness with which the Office for Refugees often acts. In Kosovo she met with two 17- and 18-year-old girls who had been separated from their families in Lucerne within a day and were then sent back to Pristina. From there they had returned to their burned-out family homes—without any prospect of schooling, work or a basis for their subsistence. Another example is the death of the Palestinian refugee Khaled Abuzarifeh, who was suffocated in March 1999 during his deportation at Zurich Kloten airport, when his mouth was bound up with tape.

In the run-up to the referendum, politicians and the authorities had boasted about their restrictive measures against immigrants and the accelerated deportation of refugees without papers. Repeated raids took place, including one at a hotel building site in Wengen, where two days before the referendum a group of construction workers without documents were immediately taken into custody pending deportation. In another case, 150 policemen carried out a raid at “Meise,” a refugee transit home in Winterthur, where 16 persons were arrested mostly for petty reasons, such as missing identity papers.

The fight against *Überfremdung* (swamping with foreigners), the control and restriction of “unwanted immigrants”, the division of those without a Swiss passport into the useful and unwelcome (and their corresponding treatment) is already a reality—practised and supported by both proponents of the 18 percent initiative and its opponents.

If one considers all these facts and the climate that is produced by such national practices, one must revise any initial negative judgement about those who voted in the referendum. The fact that 1.3 million Swiss

citizens defied this climate and rejected the “foreigners out” politics is nevertheless not a bad result. One can assume that at least a large proportion of them rejected the initiative out of principled human considerations.

The referendum was the sixth attempt to push through such an immigration ban since the notorious Schwarzenbach initiative of 1970, which sought to impose a limit of 10 percent in each individual canton on. All six referenda suffered a defeat.

The principled refusal expressed in the recent vote is not enough to repel the attacks on human rights contained in the initiative. Society, which values the possession of a document made from paper and red cardboard more highly than a shared humanity, and which categorises people according to their immediate usefulness for the “economy”—for the profit of the top 10,000—represents a threat to all who do not belong to this layer.



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