

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 40 (2013)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Warning signs over immigration policy
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906636>

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Warning signs over immigration policy

Switzerland is an attractive destination for foreigners, and the high level of immigration confirms this. What is today referred to as “density stress” is evident in many places. There are nonetheless significant differences between past and present immigration. These days, it is also a sign of economic prosperity. However, there is growing unease among large sections of the population, and radical solution proposals are gaining the upper hand.

By Jürg Müller

In German, “Sack” and “Tüte” both signify the same item, a bag. But in Switzerland customers are given a “Sack” to put their shopping in at the supermarket, rather than a “Tüte”. This is what Joachim Eibach has learned on his Swiss German course. Eibach is German; he has been a professor of history at the University of Berne since 2004 and is making every effort to ensure he integrates into Swiss society in the best way possible. Yongala Falanga Ndambo is out and about in Berne, working as a tram and bus driver. The Congolese citizen has been living in Switzerland for 20 years. He puts on his tie in the morning with great care. He loves the responsibility of driving a Bernese tram. His philosophy for life is “do your job well and show decency towards everyone”. He too is a model of integration.

1.825 million immigrants were living in Switzerland at the end of 2012. This means that one in four people in employment is of foreign origin. The Federal Office for Migration (FOM) presents two of them, Joachim Eibach and Yongala Falanga Ndambo, in a video clip on its homepage lasting just under two minutes. The immigrants “contribute to Switzerland’s prosperity through their work” is the message on the FOM’s website. The government body has sought to give immigration a human face through its short video portraits. However, it is not just noble intentions and exemplary attempts at integration that lie behind the nice short film; it is also a response to signs of growing anxiety.

Relaxed attitude is dissipating

A sense of alarm started to take hold in August last year when Switzerland’s population exceeded the eight-million mark. Concern was felt at various levels and among almost all sections of society. Most people experience “density stress” in their everyday lives, whether it is in the form of overcrowded trains or increasingly heavy congestion on the roads. Housing is becoming an ever scarcer commodity, with the cost of rents and

land rising. The impact is also being felt in schools, the healthcare system, social policy and, above all, the labour market. More than half of the professors working at Swiss universities come from abroad, for instance. There is no longer a relaxed attitude everywhere – tension is brewing in some places. And those factions who have always used the immigration issue to attract votes believe their time has now come.

Politicians are therefore upping the ante. Several referenda will be held in the very near future that not only call for a change in direction in immigration policy but could also have a major impact on Switzerland’s relationship with the European Union. These include the pending popular initiatives “against mass immigration”, submitted by the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), and “stop overpopulation – safeguard natural resources”, put forward by the Ecopop Association. With Croatia’s accession to the EU in the middle of 2013, the extension of the free movement of persons accord is also under discussion. A referendum against this is almost certain to take place.

All these proposals have a real chance of success at referendum. The Swiss people can no longer be depended upon to support the Federal Council’s policy on immigration as they did in the years 2000, 2005 and 2009 with regard to the introduction of the free movement of persons and its extension on two occasions. An acute fear of being overrun by immigrants instead of a matter-of-fact weighing-up of interests may prove decisive at the ballot box.

The proportion of foreigners is higher than ever

Let us focus on the figures for a moment. The proportion of foreigners in Switzerland today is

higher than ever and stands at over a fifth of the population (around 23%). In 2012, the resident foreign population rose by a total of three per cent or just under 53,000 people. This increase is primarily explained by the fact that immigration from EU countries has been made easier by the free movement of persons (up 4.1%, as in 2011). The largest immigrant groups arrived from Portugal and Germany. Immigration from countries outside the EU only climbed slightly (by 0.9%).

Switzerland has had a relatively high proportion of foreigners for some time. The share of permanent foreign residents stood at 15% as far back as 1910. After a decline during the two world wars, this level was reached again in 1980. The high proportion of foreigners is not least a result of Switzerland’s restrictive naturalisation procedure. In the event of high levels of immigration



A scenario presented by critics of immigration for the city of Zurich

from EU countries, the Federal Council can activate the safety-valve clause or, in other words, impose a limitation on the number of residence permits, provided certain conditions are met. It already took this step for the eastern EU states last year. The restriction of the free movement of persons is nevertheless a contentious issue as it is regarded as an affront by many EU countries. The Federal Council is set to decide in April whether the safety-valve clause will be applied to all EU states.

The numbers are rising not just in terms of the permanent foreign population but also among asylum seekers for whom the figures soared by 27% in 2012 to reach 28,631. The federal authorities are responding with various measures. First and foremost, the asylum process is to be considerably speeded up. A referendum has been called against the set of proposals approved by the Federal Council and Parliament, which include urgent measures on asylum. The Swiss people will therefore decide on 9 June 2013 (see page 14).

Switzerland is dependent on immigrants

The authorities are undoubtedly taking notice of the fact that many people are anxious about the growing numbers of foreig-

ners. The Social Democrat Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga, head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police and therefore responsible for the immigration issue, is only too familiar with the dilemma facing the federal authorities. She has warned in various interviews against playing down the problems of immigration and has highlighted the dangers of overlooking the unsavoury aspects of this phenomenon. At the same time, the Federal Councillor has emphasised that Switzerland must live with immigration as it is vitally important to the country. Immigrants make an enormous contribution to ensuring Switzerland is one of the most competitive countries in the world, she says.

Sommaruga also points to a historical fact – Switzerland would not have become what it is today without immigrants over the course of its history. Protestants who fled to Switzerland for religious reasons in the 17th century and the liberal political refugees in the 19th century, who included the founders of many companies (e.g. Brown, Boveri and Nestlé), have given Switzerland enormous momentum. The industrial boom and expansion of the railway network in the latter decades of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th

century sparked one of the largest waves of immigration. The high level of immigration after the Second World War was also the result of strong economic growth. Switzerland experienced the largest wave of immigration in its history between 1950 and 1970. A total of 2.68 million foreigners arrived in Switzerland on one-year work permits or as residents during this period. At the same time, around three million permits were also issued to seasonal workers. Xenophobic political parties became increasingly influential in the 1960s. Their campaigns on excessive immigration primarily targeted foreign workers from Italy.

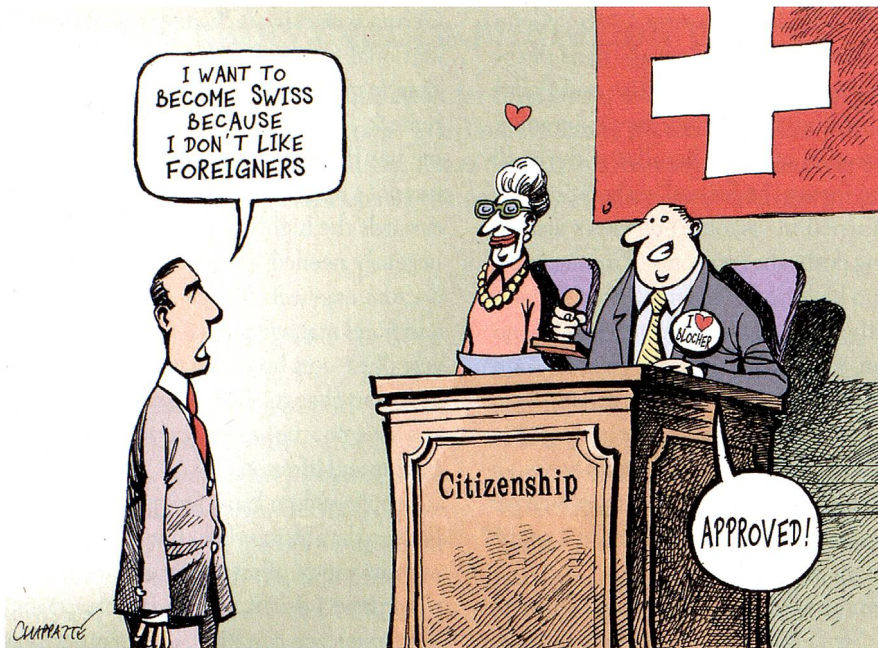
The Italians in the past and today the Germans

It is no longer the Italians whom the Swiss get worked up about, but rather the large numbers of

Germans working in Switzerland. The SVP National Councillor Natalie Rickli from Zurich sparked outrage a year ago with her remark: “Individual Germans don’t bother me but their arrival en masse does.” This was not a particularly friendly tone to adopt towards the highly qualified professionals urgently needed by the economy, such as doctors, engineers, IT specialists, professors and hotel managers, etc. This example clearly illustrates how scapegoats and sympathies can change. The once maligned Italians have now become paragons in terms of cuisine and lifestyle.

People seldom learn from history, but it is clear that Switzerland has dealt with numerous waves of immigration in the past, which have initially attracted criticism and seen emotions run high, in a manner that has produced great benefit. The problem is just that once fears of being overrun by immigrants take hold and politicians of every ilk only seek to focus on the challenging aspects of immigration, then rational argument becomes of little use. It would actually be entirely apt to exalt immigration because Switzerland is not just one of the most multicultural nations in Europe, it is also more prosperous than ever before. The correlation is obvious – when the economy booms, immigration rises. It is dictated by demand among companies. More people arrived during the economic upturn from 2006 to 2008. Net immigration declined sharply by a quarter in 2009, a year of recession, compared with the previous year. Immigration also stimulates domestic consumption. This is revealed by the retail industry study conducted by the major bank Credit Suisse. The study also provided evidence that growth in the retail industry is higher than population growth. This is explained by the fact that most immigrants are highly qualified, are accordingly well paid and, in turn, spend their income.

However, the problems mentioned cannot simply be dismissed. The SVP is far from the only party with immigration on its agenda. The Social Democrats are also taking notice of people’s anxieties. They presented a policy paper on immigration in 2012. However, unlike the SVP, they are not seeking the immediate revocation of the free movement of persons. Their solution is to bulk up the accompanying measures to counter wage pressure and high rental costs. They regard “misguided con-



"I want to become Swiss, I don't like foreigners."

servative regional economic and tax policies" as a grave mistake. Switzerland attracts "international companies with the lowest tax rates of all structurally strong countries despite not having enough well qualified personnel", complains the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP). The upshot is that foreign workers flood into already

overheated economic hubs. It is only really the companies that benefit from this, whilst the Swiss public has to endure the negative consequences, such as rocketing property prices and high rents, etc.

Barroom debates rarely distinguish between the various categories of immigrant – asylum seekers, permanent residents,

multi-billionaires paying flat-rate taxation, management executives and CEOs, students, agricultural workers, senior physicians, professors, and service and trade specialists. They all use the Swiss infrastructure. But to blame every problem and inconvenience on immigration is unreasonable. The growing use of residential space is, for example, primarily due to the rising demands of Swiss society, which have been increasing for years. Urban sprawl is essentially the result of poor spatial planning, and the rise in mobility on the roads and railways is a consequence of this and the ever greater distance between home and work that urban sprawl brings. Immigration accentuates these home-made problems and makes the already existing need for reform even more acute.

Simple solutions to complex problems

The focus of attention has suddenly shifted from reforms to radical solutions in light of the density stress. However, there are always pitfalls with simple solutions to complex problems. This is equally true of the immigration initiatives launched by both the SVP and the Ecopop Association (see boxes). In its dispatch on the SVP's popular initiative,

"Concrete solutions to specific problems instead of abstract figures"

Migration is nothing new in historical terms, but the movement of migrants is particularly intensive today. Professor Walter Leimgruber, Chairman of the Federal Commission on Migration, believes that an acceptable level of immigration is not a matter of figures but a question of social consensus. Interview: Jürg Müller

«SWISS REVIEW»: *Switzerland's population stands at over eight million, around 1.8 million of whom are immigrants. Is our population too high?*

WALTER LEIMGRUBER: There is no basis for calculating whether too many, too few or exactly the right number of people live in a country. How many immigrants a society can actually sustain is primarily a matter of social consensus.

What role has immigration played in Swiss history?

Switzerland is not a country of immigration, historically speaking. But migration is nothing new. There have always been social groups who have moved around and covered large distances. In the Middle Ages, these included craftsmen, merchants and scholars. Switzerland was also a nation of emigration for long periods, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries when poverty forced people to leave.

So, there has always been migration. Why are a lot of people so concerned about the current situation?

This clearly has to do with the intensity of migration. But we also find migration difficult to accept because the notion of a static, stable society is ingrained in us. This idea first emerged in the 19th century with the establishment of nation states. It is the belief that everyone has a natural place where they live and have roots. This has hardly ever reflected reality. Above all, national borders were not perceived as such in the period up to the First World War and cross-border exchange of all kinds was taken for granted.

Nevertheless, the high levels of immigration are causing anxiety in large sections of the population. What would you say to these people as the Chairman of the Federal Commission on Migration

the Federal Council warns that the proposal is directly opposed to the agreement with the EU on the free movement of persons. The Federal Council points out that the termination of this agreement would have "grave consequences for the Swiss economy which earns one in two francs in the EU". It would jeopardise the entire set of bilateral agreements.

The Ecopop initiative could trigger a completely unpredictable dynamic. The popular initiative put forward by this enigmatic association appeals to very different groups. Ecopop sees itself as an environmental movement that addresses population issues. Restricting immigration is traditionally a demand made by those on the right. However, the goal of curbing immigration to protect the environment is also popular among some left-wing and green voters.

Switzerland is therefore facing some stormy debates on immigration that, depending on the outcome of the referenda, might have more far-reaching consequences than simply doing further damage to its image. They have the potential to unravel Switzerland's entire policy on Europe, which is already in a very fragile state.

JÜRIG MÜLLER is an editor with the "Swiss Review"



SVP "AGAINST MASS IMMIGRATION"

The SVP popular initiative "against mass immigration" was a major campaign issue at the federal elections in October 2011. It was submitted in February 2012 with 135,557 valid signatures. The Federal Council opposes the initiative, which is set to be addressed by Parliament this year before being put before the Swiss people. The initiative calls for Switzerland to set annual ceilings and quotas for residence permits. To avoid any loopholes, this would apply to all categories of immigrant, including cross-border commuters and asylum seekers. Immigration would then be possible provided it serves "Switzerland's general economic interests, taking account of the precedence of Swiss citizens". The text of the initiative states that the "key criteria for issuing

residence permits are, in particular, an application from an employer, the ability to integrate and adequate independent means of existence".

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION THROUGH POPULATION POLICY

The Ecopop popular initiative "stop overpopulation – safeguard natural resources" was submitted in November 2012 with 119,816 valid signatures. The Federal Council has yet to adopt a position. The Ecopop Association describes itself as the "only environmental protection organisation in Switzerland that seriously addresses the issue of population". The initiative aims to establish Switzerland's population at a level "where the natural resources are safeguarded over the long term". It calls for immigration into Switzerland to be restricted to 0.2% of the population per year. Federal government should also be obliged to spend 10% of its development aid on voluntary family planning initiatives in Third World countries.

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These concerns are justified to an extent as migration and mobility present huge challenges, for society as a whole but also for individual groups in particular. The main issue is fears over employment, affordable housing and globalisation. Old certainties that the economy would always follow an upward trend and prosperity would constantly rise are being dispelled.

Is this why there is so much hostility towards the Germans today? They are immigrants who are actually similar to us in many respects.

This hostility is quite extraordinary. It is firstly explained by historical reasons. We have been involved in many political conflicts over the centuries, starting with the confederation breaking away from the German Empire through to the Second World War. The Swiss have always attached great importance to having their own separate identity and not being regarded as Germans. The main differences today are in terms of mentality. Germans think that they can live in (German-speaking) Swiss society without any problems because both speak the same language. But that is often exactly where the rub lies – Germans are much more direct in the way they express themselves. They often fail to understand, for example, that when Swiss people say "yes, but" they actually mean "no". A lot of communication is required.

Two initiatives on immigration are pending – the SVP immigration initiative and that of the Ecopop Association. Do these offer potential solutions?

Both initiatives are based on assumptions that cannot be proven right or wrong in quantitative terms. There are parts of the world that are much more densely populated than Switzerland where the system works well and other sparsely populated areas that perform poorly. These initiatives are based on the wrong approach. We should not seek to implement quantitative targets but instead we should examine where the problems really lie and aim to find tailored solutions that have the support of the majority of the population.



WALTER LEIMGRUBER (53) is a tenured professor and head of the seminar on cultural studies and European ethnology at the University of Basel. He has undertaken research visits to the USA, France and Germany. A guest lecturer in Marburg and Vienna, he is Chairman of the Federal Commission on Migration since January 2012.