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Humanitarian Switzerland faced with influx of refugees

Over 35,000 people sought asylum in Switzerland last year. The continuing flow of refugees is inevitably producing both sympathy and hostility and a conflict between Switzerland's humanitarian tradition and its uncertainty.

MARC LETTAU

Europe's refugee crisis has produced some disturbing, indeed unbearable images over recent months. Images of European railway stations where thousands of people seeking help have been left stranded. Images of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian refugee washed up dead on the shores of Bodrum. What has been going on at the same time in Switzerland seems anachronistic. Campaigners carried quickly scribbled placards proclaiming "refugees welcome" at the border

railway station in Buchs in early September. They waited in vain. The announced influx of Syrian refugees circumvented Switzerland, affording it the new experience of not always being the land of dreams.

The issue of refugees nevertheless had a major influence on the autumn elections. In the build-up, the SVP highlighted many people's sense of insecurity and, given the many asylum seekers from Eritrea, voiced its criticism of the "asylum chaos" prevailing

in Switzerland and the lax approach to dealing with "illegitimate" refugees. The continuing debate about refugees and immigration policy issues overshadowed other areas of politics and had the effect that Switzerland shifted to the right on election day.

Around three asylum seekers to 1,000 residents

This did not change the run of things. The number of Syrian war refugees seeking asylum in Switzerland shot up in the last quarter. The State Secretariat for Migration continually corrected its forecast for 2015 upwards, in the end to over 35,000 asylum seekers. Is that many? In relation to the size of the country this means that around three asylum seekers are looking for protection for every 1,000 people living in Switzerland. While not a flood, it is a relatively high figure in comparison with other European countries. The figures are nevertheless much

lower than during the war in the disintegrating Yugoslavia when there were up to 53,000 asylum applications waiting to be handled in Switzerland.

The Minister of Justice Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) has given assurances that while “volatile” the situation is entirely manageable. Her view contrasts with complaints from some cantons that they could barely provide enough beds for asylum seekers. Some asylum seekers were even left without a roof over their heads. However, this is not down to a lack of accommodation but instead the situation in the cantons. They are being instructed by federal government to open accommodation for asylum seekers but can often only do so by going against the will of the people. The cantons are therefore stepping up pressure on federal government to provide accommodation, for instance in military bases.

Switzerland’s distinctively federalist structure is again hampering a rapid response to the emergency. And yet experts were warning over a year ago that there would be a dramatic surge in the number of Syrians fleeing. NGOs consequently called upon Switzerland to take in 100,000 refugees from Syria. The Federal Council finally decided to accept 5,000 refugees in particular need of protection.

To conclude that Switzerland is doing nothing to adapt its asylum system to the challenges would be totally wrong. Minister of Justice Sommaruga initiated a comprehensive reform of the Asylum Act in 2013, two years after the outbreak of the Syrian war. Her main objective is to significantly shorten the asylum process which can often take years at present. Most asylum applications should be dealt with in a maximum of 140 days in future. This should greatly reduce the long period of uncertainty which is stressful for refugees. To ensure fair decisions despite the accelerated process, there are also plans to improve the legal protection of asylum seekers.

Parliament supported this reform by a large majority. At the time of going to press it was uncertain what would become of it. The SVP is seeking to force a referendum in the hope that the Swiss people will jettison the reform. The SVP believes providing asylum seekers with legal aid is absurd as this creates “free lawyers for everyone”. It is fundamentally opposed to the reform and supports a counter-proposal which would effectively abolish the right to asylum.

The opposition from the right is leaving those on the other side shaking their heads in disbelief. Stefan Frey, the spokesperson for the Swiss Refugee Council, remarks: “Those opposed to the reform are advocating the status quo with many years of uncertainty for those concerned.” Those wishing to maintain long waiting periods have to continue accepting “huge social costs” for people who “cannot be integrated owing to their uncertain status”. Switzerland has adopted a defensive position towards people seeking protection for too long, according to Frey: “There is now a huge backlog of work with regard to integration. This will have a major influence on the debate in the near future.” Shorter procedures should also mean that lots of people would be ready for integration at a much earlier stage.

Opposed to “false incentives”

The forthcoming debate is already being eagerly fuelled. The Swiss Conference of Social Action Institutions is urgently calling for more action to tackle unemployment amongst the newcomers. Everyone should be offered a one-year, mandatory careers induction course 12 months after arrival at the latest. There is nevertheless vociferous opposition to this proposal. Reto Lindegger, the director of the Association of Swiss Communes, warns against creating “false incen-

tives”. The “right to education” could lead to even more people flooding into Switzerland.

Integration is never a unilateral process. Whether refugees settle over time also depends upon the attitudes of those already living in the country. There has been a noticeable development in Switzerland in this respect. According to Gianni d’Amato, a professor and immigration researcher at the University of Neuchâtel, there has been a significant decline in commitment from civil society to refugees over the past 20 years. He believes this is explained by “professionalisation”. State-organised integration has resulted in citizens no longer feeling the need to contribute themselves.

Awakening memories of the former Yugoslavia

The situation is clear in terms of figures. The over 35,000 asylum applications submitted last year represent a peak but not a record. The influx of refugees was much higher during the period from 1990 to 1999 when Yugoslavia fell apart amidst the turmoil of war and many people sought protection in Switzerland. During the most difficult years of the conflict, asylum applications in Switzerland reached 53,000 at times. Around 30,000 asylum seekers arrived in Switzerland from Serbia alone at the height of the war in 1999. However, the flow of refugees at that time can only be compared with the current influx to a certain extent. Many of the refugees from the former Yugoslavia were initially able to stay with “guest worker families” already residing in Switzerland. The geographical proximity of south-eastern Europe to Switzerland also had an impact on acceptance. (MUL)

Stefan Frey from the Swiss Refugee Council takes issue with this. Cantonal provincialism can sometimes hamper tangible humanitarian efforts. The private accommodation of asylum seekers is handled completely differently in each canton. The “huge potential of host families” therefore remains untapped: There would be “hundreds of offers” from the cantons of Geneva, Vaud, Aargau and Berne alone, Frey says.

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