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“Fortress Europe” under scrutiny

Parliament has made the contentious decision to increase Switzerland's monetary contribution to Frontex, the European Union agency that secures the EU's external borders. The electorate will give its verdict on 15 May. A no vote could lead to further tension with Brussels.

THEODORA PETER

“When I think of Frontex, I mainly think of violence,” says Malek Ossi. The 28-year-old Syrian, who fled to Switzerland via Turkey six years ago, is a member of the Migrant Solidarity Network, which has forced a referendum opposing an increase in Switzerland's contribution to the budget of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Ossi spoke to the online magazine “Republik” about the odyssey that brought him to Switzerland via the Balkan route. “I know what it means when the Turkish military are behind you and the Greek police are waiting for you up ahead.”

He hid in the forest for a week with dozens of other refugees before attempting to cross the Evros river border, which was being guarded by the

Greek and Frontex police at the time. Ossi eventually managed to get into Europe, but many others failed to reach the EU border. Refugees repeatedly complain of being driven back by border guards. For example, there are documented cases of Greek coastguards in the Aegean pushing migrants in dinghies back into Turkish waters.

These so-called pushbacks violate the European Convention on Human Rights and the Geneva Refugee Convention, which states that refugees must be allowed to file an asylum application and have the right to due process. In other words, anyone seeking asylum should at least be able to do just that. Asylum and human rights organisations accuse Frontex of tolerating or even being involved in illegal

pushbacks by police forces. A European Parliament committee has now called for greater monitoring and transparency.

Schengen obligation

Last autumn, the federal parliament also addressed Frontex's role along the EU's external borders. As a member of Schengen, Switzerland has been making financial contributions to Frontex since 2011. As such, it has a responsibility to help fund the EU border agency's budget increase.

The expansion of Frontex will involve building up a standing corps of 10,000 operational staff by 2027. Switzerland has been paying 14 million Swiss francs a year until now. Parlia-

Frontex, shown here patrolling the Greek-Turkish border, wants to build up a standing corps of 10,000 operational staff. Photo: Keystone



ment has decided to increase this annual contribution to 61 million francs by 2027. The SP and the Greens were against the idea, arguing that Frontex wanted to establish a “bona fide army” to seal off “Fortress Europe”. However, the National Council and the Council of States both backed a stronger commitment to protecting the external borders of the Schengen Area – the consensus was that it benefits Switzerland.

That the Mediterranean had become a mass grave was a “European scandal”, said the Green Liberal National Councillor Beat Flach. But this was not the fault of Frontex, he added. They were the solution, not the problem. Responding to sceptics, Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer suggested that Switzerland would be better placed to help safeguard fundamental rights if it “played a role on the frontline”. His EU-sceptic SVP is split, however. Some party members welcome tighter controls on the

external Schengen borders as a bulwark against “economic migrants”. Others would prefer the extra millions to be invested in protecting Switzerland’s borders.

Against the “militarisation of borders”

This issue will now be decided by popular vote, after an alliance of some 30 organisations forced a referendum. The activists comprising the Migrant Solidarity Network are fundamentally opposed to the EU border regime, saying it “symbolises the militarisation of borders”.

Amnesty International does not belong to the alliance. Instead, the human rights organisation favours strengthening the very powers within the EU that would oblige Frontex to “focus on protecting refugees instead of threatening them further”. Resistance to migrants on the EU border mainly comes from the Eastern Euro-

pean member states. The vote on 15 May will not decide whether Switzerland contributes to EU border protection per se, but it could have implications in terms of Switzerland’s place in the Schengen Area, says Fabio Wasserfallen, who is a political scientist at the University of Berne. “You are either in or out when it comes to Schengen – with all the consequences that go with it.” Switzerland need not fear immediate expulsion if the electorate votes no, “but pressure to find a quick solution would be considerable”.

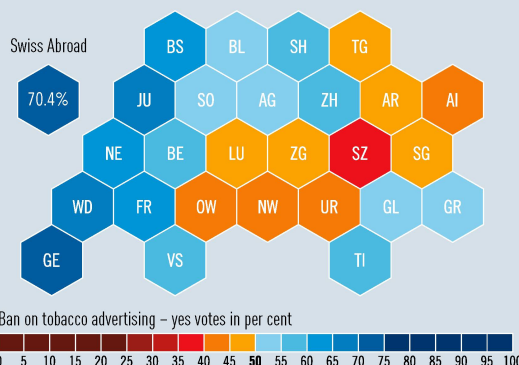
And it would cause irritation in Brussels, where Switzerland would no longer be regarded as a “reliable partner”, Wasserfallen explains. This could further complicate relations with the EU, which are already strained.



Review of the 13 February votes

Yes to restricting tobacco advertising:

Children and young people are to be protected from all forms of tobacco advertising, after 57 per cent of voters and the majority of cantons approved an initiative submitted by health organisations.



No to a ban on animal testing:

An emphatic 79 per cent of the electorate rejected a popular initiative submitted by a citizens’ group calling for a radical change in current pharmaceutical testing practices. Not one single canton voted yes.

