

KEEP OUT

In the land of Heidi and cuckoo clocks a row over immigration is tearing the country apart

ON FEBRUARY 9 the most democratic country in the world voted by a razor-thin margin (50.3%) to limit the influx of foreigners, in a referendum that violates one of the central tenets of the European Union's core treaties: the free movement of people. The referendum requires the Swiss government to renegotiate or cancel the Swiss-EU agreement on this key right by 2017. Strict quotas would have to be introduced.

Nowhere in Europe are foreigners deemed more of a threat than in its diplomatic heart. The right-wing Swiss People's Party (known as the SVP or Schweizerische Volkspartei) who sponsored the initiative, determined years ago that the best way to keep Switzerland idyllic was to do everything in its power to keep the non-Swiss out. The problem, as governments all over Europe have found, is that while markets and the demand for jobs is highly elastic, the immigrant population is not. As the Swiss novelist Max Frisch put it, "We asked for workers but we got human beings instead."

In the months leading up to the vote, Switzerland's public spaces were plastered with an SVP poster depicting a black, menacing apple tree with tentacle-like roots crushing Switzerland into little pieces, next to the message: "Masslosigkeit schadet! Masseneinwanderung stoppen." ("Excessiveness harms! Stop mass immigration.") All those posters were expensive, and the SVP gets

its money mostly from one man: billionaire business owner and SVP leader Christoph Blocher, who spent four million Swiss francs (CHF) on this anti-immigration campaign alone.

The apple tree campaign was among the tamer advertisements for the party. Former anti-immigrant campaign illustrations have depicted white sheep kicking black or yellow sheep out of the country and black crows pecking at Switzerland, like a piece of bread. Some critics claim they resemble Nazi posters, but Blocher dismisses the idea: "Swiss people are not Nazis," he says, simply.

The number of foreigners in Switzerland currently stands at 23%, with about 80,000 new arrivals each year. Blocher would like to see this number cut by at least 60%. "From 1970 until 2002, we had between 23,000 - 30,000 immigrants arriving annually," he says. "This number is manageable."

It's unclear how many of the people that voted on February 9 understood the referendum's implications, and the areas with the lowest percentage of foreigners were the most likely to vote in favour of limiting immigration - to keep out something that barely affects them. Some argue that the SVP played on voters' emotions. "It's some kind of manipulation. The SVP created a lot of fear," says Juergen Bouli, Managing Director of BCD, a company that provides consultancy services to foreigners in Switzerland.

BY
BARBARA
STCHERBACHEFF



THE SWISS PEOPLE'S PARTY (SVP) ELECTION POSTER FROM 2009, CALLING FOR RESTRICTIONS ON IMMIGRATION IN THE EU.

He adds: "When you talk to elderly people, they are just afraid. They don't think in a politically or economically reasonable way."

The reality of the situation in Switzerland is far from the "masseneinwanderung" chaos portrayed by the SVP. While even Blocher admits that immigration is less of a problem in Switzerland than elsewhere, he still regards the current situation as unacceptable, and his rhetoric is alarmist.

"We have no ghettos like in Germany or Paris," he says. "We don't have extreme social tension. But when you cannot find a seat on the train anymore and the highways are blocked, then we become like rats in a cage. It causes stress. In China or Japan, they can live like that because they are used to being packed into tiny spaces. But here, we like to have our privacy and our space."

Bouli disagrees. "The trains have been full forever, and not because of immigrants," he says. "I've been living here for 52 years and there's always full trains between the big cities."

According to Madga Zihlmann, a Swiss immigration lawyer, hostility towards foreigners is not limited to the SVP but now permeates the organisation that grants permits. "Orders of the Migrationsamt (immigration office) are frequently judicially incorrect or violate the procedural laws," she says.

"The most difficult cases are those in which an appeal comes too late," Zihlmann adds. "For example, in a case in which the groom got arrested and deported a few hours before his wedding which would have assured him the right for a permanent permit. This violated clearly his right

of marriage and family life. In my experience, the Migrationsamt in general refuses requests whenever possible, positive discretionary adjudication is very rare. Asylum seekers - and especially the rejected ones - get bullied a lot."

Though incidents of overt racism are seldom documented, foreigners often experience it firsthand. "One woman with status F told me that she lived with her family in a house of the municipality, which was in a really bad condition, with broken windows and mould," Zihlmann says. "When she went to the municipality to complain, they told her that she is lucky to live there... If not, she could go back to Africa."

"The problem is that Switzerland never had a war. They have a lot of money and great schools, but there is a lot of narrow-mindedness. I think a lot of the Swiss don't understand what the value is from immigrants," Bouli says.

If the 50.3% of the country's conservative-leaning voters have their way, Blocher and the SVP leaders may get exactly what they want - a Switzerland that ends up looking exactly as it did 100 years ago.

But any victory for Blocher may be short-lived. The repercussions of the February 9 result - public shock, business uncertainty and condemnation from EU neighbours - were quickly felt. One Zurich-based tax consultant spoke of a client (a German financial company) that cancelled its plans to relocate to Switzerland on February 11, just two days after the vote.

"They wanted to hire two Swiss and bring eight people from Frankfurt, then cancelled the whole thing. The reason is quite clear - it's the vote. They wanted to create jobs and invest 20 million CHF, but you don't do that with so much uncertainty," the tax consultant says. "Businesses don't feel that Switzerland has the same stability that it used to."

Blocher defends the referendum. "It was interesting that on Sunday (February 9) the knee-jerk reaction of European politicians was to complain about how awful Switzerland was," he said. "But on Monday morning, the European people wrote on Internet forums about how wonderful Switzerland is - a direct democracy, we've voted to stop the free immigration and now the government has to act. We have the possibility to change things that other countries don't. I believe this same referendum would succeed in Germany, Denmark, and Italy, and possibly the UK."

In the meantime, most Swiss are hoping that the vote won't jeopardise their country's future. "The Swiss are champions of 'durchwursteln,' i.e., finding a solution," Frauenfelder said. "I hope it will happen in this way." ■