

Immigration vote isolates Swiss

Swiss voters last Sunday narrowly voted in favour of reintroducing strict quotas for immigration from European Union member states, much to the annoyance of the Swiss government and business leaders as well as the European Commission.

The referendum, promoted by the right-wing conservative Swiss People's Party, was backed by 50.3 per cent of the electorate and effectively annuls the Swiss-EU agreement on the freedom of movement, which has been in force since 2002, and which took years to negotiate.

The vote was to some extent divided along linguistic lines, with French-speaking areas voting against, German-speaking regions divided, and the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino firmly in favour.

Switzerland seems to be polarised between the more liberal, pro-European west of the country and the conservative German-speaking heartland and Italian-speaking Ticino. Ironically, those areas with the most immigrants voted against the proposal to reintroduce immigration quotas.

The vote reflects concerns in Switzerland over immigration; 20 per cent of the eight million-strong population is foreign, and last year 80,000 new immigrants, most of them from Germany, Portugal, France and Italy, arrived in the country to work.

*Cherry-picking with the EU is not a
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Those campaigning for a 'yes' vote in the referendum claimed that the free movement of people has put pressure on housing, health, education and transport. They also argued that foreign workers drove salaries down.

- German Foreign Minister

However, unemployment in Switzerland is still very low at about three per cent, meaning that non-Swiss nationals are not 'stealing' jobs from the locals, but contributing to the country's economy.

The referendum result is bound to complicate Swiss-EU relations and could lead to a whole review by Brussels of its bilateral relations with Switzerland. The agreement on the free movement between Switzerland and the EU is also complemented by the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, the right to buy property and the coordination of social security systems. Will these all be up for review now?

Last Tuesday, for example, the European Commission announced that talks on cross-border energy trade with Switzerland had been suspended.

The future of the talks, the Commission said, would be seen in the context of the new bilateral relationship between the two sides.

On Wednesday, furthermore, European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso said in an interview with Reuters that the Swiss vote would have "serious consequences" for Switzerland's relations with the EU. Barroso hinted that Swiss nationals could lose the right to live and work in the EU.

"In terms of reciprocity, it's not appropriate that Swiss citizens have unrestricted freedom of movement in the European Union – I think there are 430,000 here, which in relative terms is more than the one million European citizens that are in Switzerland," Barroso said.

Switzerland's participation in the EU's new research and student exchange programmes for 2014-20, Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+, are also expected to be put on hold. A condition for Switzerland's participation in these programmes was its willingness to extend the freedom of movement agreement with the EU to Croatia, which joined the bloc last July.

After last Sunday's referendum, this now seems unlikely, which means the talks on Switzerland's participation in Horizon 2020 and Erasmus+ could well be suspended.

The vote is certainly not good news for the Swiss economy and not surprisingly, the country's business sector campaigned heavily for a 'no' vote.

Markus Spillmann, editor of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung in Zurich, wrote: "The relationship between Switzerland and the EU is now completely open. This will certainly be no good for the economy and for prosperity in this country. Inward-looking Switzerland has won. That's not good for a small, open, resources-poor country."

The EU considers the free movement of people as being an essential pillar of the single market and Switzerland's possible exclusion from this bloc would be very bad news indeed.

Switzerland depends on the single market for 62 per cent of its exports and 79 per cent of its imports. Furthermore, businesses are increasingly dependent on highly qualified staff from the EU. Switzerland, after all, is where five of the top 50 European companies by market capitalisation are based.

Long and complicated negotiations now lie ahead between the EU and Switzerland. I am sure that Switzerland will do its best at damage control but somehow I can't imagine how, as a consequence of the referendum result, the principle of the free movement of labour can be maintained between the two sides. In such a scenario Switzerland has more to lose than the EU.

Of course, it is not in the EU's interest to allow Switzerland to reach a 'pick and mix' deal. As Germany's Foreign Minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, said: "Cherry-picking with the EU is not a sustainable strategy. The Swiss have damaged themselves with this result".

Allowing 'cherry-picking' would only encourage other eurosceptic elements within the EU to demand the same as the Swiss; indeed, there has already been such talk from a number of right-wing leaders.

Geert Wilders, the leader of the right-wing Freedom Party in the Netherlands, called the Swiss result "fantastic" and called on his country to follow suit. Marine Le Pen, leader of France's National Front, said the same about France.

"This Swiss victory will reinforce the will of the French people to stop mass immigration," she said.

In Germany the anti-euro party, Alternative for Germany, demanded a referendum on immigration. And in Austria, Heinz-Christian Strache, leader of the far-right Freedom party, called for the same.

The aftermath of the Swiss vote will also be closely watched in Britain, where David Cameron has been talking about similar measures to those supported by the Swiss, namely a cap on migration from EU countries and a curb on the free movement of labour; in effect a renegotiation of the UK's membership of the EU.

If the EU considerably restricts Switzerland's access to the single market as a result of its imposition of quotas on EU migrants, it will weaken Mr Cameron's argument that Britain can get a new deal within the EU without major consequences. If, on the other hand, Switzerland gets off lightly in its negotiations with the EU, which I doubt, this will strengthen Mr Cameron's position.

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8 Comments Times of Malta

Cynthia Misokova ▾

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Peter Murray · 8 months ago

Isn't Switzerland already 'isolated' by not being a member of the EU cabal? That's what the megalomaniac technocrats of the EU hierarchy would have you believe in any event, and now their thinly-veiled threat of trade restrictions (the same as they made against the UK) for daring to have a democratic (how the undemocratic EU hate that word) vote on controlling their own destiny and making their own rules and regulations of a truly sovereign and independent state, has re-emerged from the Brussels Bully Boys who want their own way - once more. I say we salute the Swiss and let us follow in their wake and call for a referendum on immigration in Malta - not that it would do any good if the result was the same as the Swiss even if one was allowed, by our tyrannical Lords and Masters in Belgium.

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Gerald Goodwin · 8 months ago

It's not, in our case, the freedom of movement from other E.U. countries that concerns us, here in Malta, but the mass immigration of other people from other, outside E.U. countries, that worry us, and the big worry that the E.U. seems to be unconcerned about Malta's plight on this subject.

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P Sciberras · 8 months ago

Recently, a new approach by the West and the EU, where a referendum or a democratically elected take place, whoever is successful was not that preferred by those two, will be either threatened or not welcomed. In short, the wish of those who voted that majority is not accepted. Going into the religion or belief of those voters as long as it was democratically carried out, is not the concern of anyone. Examples: Egypt, Switzerland, Ukraine.

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stephen koludrovic · 8 months ago

The Swiss were doing fine before 2002, no reason why they can't do just as good after 2014.

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John Azzopoardi · 8 months ago

Mr MANDUCA, you fail to realize that the Swiss have a voice in what goes on in Switzerland. They are basically exercising their right to who and how many people should come and live among them. What is wrong with that. We the Maltese and Gozitan demand say and right over the illegal migration issue. It's not a PL or PN issue, but a Maltese issue.

2 ^ | ▾ · Share >



Anthony Manduca → John Azzopoardi · 8 months ago

This has nothing to do with illegal immigration. This is about going back on an agreement with the EU about the free movement of people between Switzerland and the EU. The Swiss have every right to abrogate the agreement but will have to face the consequences.

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John Azzopoardi → Anthony Manduca · 8 months ago

As you well know, what consequences. The Swiss voted knowing well that "the consequences" you talk about will be. I am sure they won't be huge as the Swiss have a good name in Europe and worldwide. The consequences will be much bigger if it were a southern European country. And by know, we all know that.

3 ^ | ▾ · Share >



Mr Tony Gatt · 8 months ago

There used to be a joke in England, 'Egg in Channel, Europe cut off'. I doubt the Swiss will lose any sleep over this issue.



There used to be a joke in England- Fog in Channel- Europe cut off . I doubt the Swiss will lose any sleep over this issue.

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