

## Switzerland, immigration and the referendum of the 9<sup>th</sup> of February

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February 9, 2014. In Switzerland, voters expressed on [three referendum questions](#): a federal decree concerning a constitutional amendment project aimed at creating an unlimited life fund to maintain and extend railways; a popular initiative demanding abortion not to be covered by the compulsory insurance; a popular initiative «against mass immigration». The third one caught Bern and Brussels' attention, especially after its approval by [50,3%](#) of voters (the participation rate for this question was [55,8%](#)).

In summary, the consultation result has been the consent - also if by a slim majority - to an important change in immigration policy, consisting in a restriction of incoming flows and in the task, for the State, to set ceilings to the number of permissions for foreigners and asylum seekers. An approach that, of course, concerns the EU citizens. In effect, as *The Guardian* [highlighted](#) the day after, the referendum's outcome contradicts the free movement of persons, included in the seven bilateral agreements (*Bilateral Agreements I*) that, since 1999, have contributed to liberalise the economic relations between the Swiss Confederation and the Union.

According to the [European Union external Service](#), out of the [European Economic Area](#), Switzerland is the state Brussels has the closest relations with and the Union is the biggest partner for Bern's international trade. This underlines as last 9<sup>th</sup> of February probably represented a significant backward step, if we consider that the choice by the Swiss electorate to limit the freedom of EU nationals to settle and work in their country could bring into question important provisions contained in the agreements regulating its relations with Brussels, especially those easing the access of Swiss business to the Union's market. As pointed out by *The Economist*, "four freedoms" of movement (concerning goods, services, people, capital) contribute to tie the two contracting parties and the non-recognition of one of these is equivalent to question the others. The same weekly newspaper believes the vote «against mass immigration» will turn into an own goal because of the substantial role the commerce with the European Union and skilled non-national workers have in Swiss economy.

It is certain that immigration doesn't represent a new social *phenomenon* in Switzerland and that it gave a large contribution to its economic and cultural history. Simply to mention some [figures](#) on the most recent years, permanent non-national residents in 2008 exceeded 1,669,000, whose more than 1,037,000 hailing from EU and EFTA countries. In 2012, they reached 1,870,000, including nearly 1,192,000 people from EU or EFTA member states. According to the [Federal Statistical Office](#), in 2012, the «population with an immigration background» - also including Swiss citizens whose one parent was born abroad - was «34.7% of the permanent resident population aged 15 or over», a third of them having the Swiss citizenship.

Therefore, the referendum of February 9 is not the effect of a sudden meeting between an isolated population and a massive inflow of persons from abroad. Moreover, if we consider some

[numbers](#) concerning the unemployment rate (4.4% in the last three months of 2012 and 4.1% one year later), we can gather that this inclination to restrict immigration is not even linked to a deterioration of the labour market's conditions.

We could suppose that through Swiss electorate spread a fear to be exposed to the same economic crisis effects suffered by the European Union, where the unemployment rate was [10.7%](#) at the end of 2013. Anyhow, it stands to reason that, if the referendum «against mass immigration» marked a distance between Bern and Brussels, it also showed a common, growing tendency to follow the requests fostered by conservative and populist political movements identifying in foreigner inflow a source of problems for the local population. On the EU side, a concrete example is provided by France, if we consider that 34% of the French - according to a recent survey by [TNS Sofres](#) - affirmed to agree with the ideas advocated by the *Front National*, whose leader is the member of the European Parliament Marine Le Pen. The latter - in an [interview](#) released to *Europe 1* - described the outcome of the referendum in Switzerland as a display of «good sense» and as an example to follow.

Certainly the “Hexagon” does not represent the only member state in which this kind of stance is taking root. A political approach focusing on managing - or preventing - structural economic problems also by a strict control and a substantial reduction of immigration is obtaining sympathizers in different areas of the Continent. It is usually parallel to an Eurosceptic perspective and, in general, its exponents [welcomed the result](#) of the Swiss referendum.

On the basis of the 9<sup>th</sup> of February outcome, within three years, Bern should convert the vote into legislative measures to set caps to immigration flows, with a system of quotas concerning also the citizens of the Union. It is about a serious issue for the economic and political relations between Switzerland and EU, but this should also become a moment of serious reflection by the European establishment on a sequence of mistakes - as the “austerity approach” to the crisis - having made the Union more and more unpopular, probably also before the public opinion of a non-member state lying on a central area of the “Old Continent” and whose labour market is still in a decent form.

The capability to be in tune with people is a goal Brussels needs to reach. Otherwise, its credibility would risk to be seriously undermined, in view of next European Parliament elections and long run.

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