

Switzerland: 21st Century Land of Opportunity

Today's Switzerland is not just an economic success story, it's also the result of successful integration.

Flavia Kleiner

Allow me to start with two questions: First, is there a region of the world in which you would prefer Switzerland to be located rather than the one in which it is actually located? Second, is there a past era in which you would prefer to live in this country rather than the present day?

My own answer to both these questions is "No." I say that because I believe Switzerland is in an incredibly strong position given its location right in the heart of Europe. Our neighbors guarantee our security, while their economies and consumers are customers for our construction machinery, cookware, and banking products. Today we feel safer and more prosperous than ever before, precisely because our neighbors are interconnected with one another – and with us.

The success of an outward-looking Switzerland is plain to see: Switzerland is one of the most innovative and competitive economies in the world. What's more, this success is to a large extent down to the efforts of immigrant workers. Consequently, current immigration policy, the possible abandonment of the bilateral agreements, and a transatlantic free trade zone that excludes Switzerland all pose a threat to Switzerland's innovative capacity – something on which the country's future success will be based.

Switzerland has always been famed for the diversity of its culture and society. I find it strange when people say Switzerland has a monoculture that came into being one way or another and now needs to be defended against foreign influences. I am proud of our characteristics – the things that make us Swiss – but I don't see this as a reason for erecting barriers against the outside world.

Unwilling to Pay the Price for Distancing Ourselves

If we transpose the economic and cultural factors of openness into the political framework conditions necessary for a continuation of this success story, I believe an interest-based relationship with the European Union – as Switzerland's most important economic and political partner – is vital. I oppose the right-wing drive for self-determination, and the net outcome this will have: I am unwilling to pay the price for distancing ourselves. In fact, if we go down that route our future prospects will inevitably be diminished. That's not what voters want, either. Fifty percent of respondents in last year's Credit Suisse Worry Barometer said their top priority was to stick with the bilateral agreements, with only 24 percent expressing a preference for them to be abandoned.

Restrictive Migration Policy Would Bring More Problems

As for the challenges facing Switzerland, we are constantly bombarded by powerful media images: Pictures of the gruesome activities of Islamist terrorists in Iraq and Somalia, for example, or of people living in extreme poverty or who are displaced, as well as of endless economic crisis scenarios that are almost impossible to fathom. Putting these impressions into context and not lapsing into fear can be quite a challenge for the average person. But what is the key to dealing with this complex world? Preserving the status quo isn't the way. The world is clearly in the midst of change, and there is a risk that we will be crushed by the sheer weight of these complex developments. Yet isolation and segregation are not the route to solving problems.

Switzerland needs to see this changing world as an opportunity for even greater success in the future. The same is true for immigration: Many immigrants are people with tremendous drive, who want to work hard for a better life. They contribute to economic success and we should make maximum use of the potential they offer – immigration is only a problem when immigrants are ostracized and their opportunities curtailed. In that situation they do not have a place in the labor market, and become marginalized from society. The more restrictive a migration policy, the more problems migration creates – not the less migration there is.

Watery Metaphors

Lastly, any sensible debate on migration would be confined to actual numbers. Instead, politicians resort to dehumanizing watery metaphors when they speak of waves, floods, and rivers of refugees.

When right-wingers create a bogeyman because they do not have any arguments, they ensure our country is not fit for the future in a globalized world and instead want to confine us to being a parochial backwater. A Switzerland that views change with optimism, and sees the future as a place for growing success, can be confident about itself. Let's hope we can say for certain in 10, 50, or 100 years' time that we are in a strong position in Europe, and that now is a great time to be alive!

Flavia Kleiner is Co-Chair of Operation Libero. The movement was founded after the referendum on the Mass Immigration Initiative, is economically and socially liberal, and aims to play an active role in the political debate.

Switzerland Is the World's Most Outward-Looking Country

Unrestricted immigration has nothing to do with open markets. We need to think urgently about where the limits to immigration should lie.

Luzi Stamm

It's no wonder that, according to the "Worry Barometer," immigration has been perceived as one of the most serious problems facing the country for years: Although I believe immigration issues have for a long time been downplayed by most of the media, the public now realize how threatening the situation has become.

Unfortunately this vital debate is dominated by sloganeering. One side is lauded for being "liberal" and "outward-looking," the other dismissed as "isolationist" and "insular." It would be more helpful if the facts and figures were placed on the table. My experience is that even politicians in the highest offices often have no idea of the scale involved. Also, business leaders understandably have very limited time to devote to the subject.

Of all the countries with more than one million inhabitants, Switzerland is the most outward-looking in the world. Take the number of foreign nationals living in Switzerland: It is the permanent home for a good two million people who do not have a Swiss passport – that's about 25 percent of the resident population (only in a few very small countries are the figures higher). In no other country are the residents as international in their outlook, maintain so many international contacts, and are equally likely to have a foreign spouse/partner as in Switzerland. "We employ more than two million foreigners in Switzerland and abroad," wrote Romandie-based economics professor François Schaller. "We have signed 130 agreements with the EU. And they call that isolationism, going-it-alone, and 'national withdrawal' mentality?"

Prosperity through Economic Openness

Our parents' generation succeeded in turning Switzerland from a poorhouse into the wealthiest country in the world in only 100 years or so (again in comparison with countries with over one million inhabitants). Switzerland achieved this magnificent performance through an open, economically liberal policy. In economic terms, our country is the standard-bearer for a "SMOPEC," a Small Open Economy.

The issue of immigration is often equated with the question of economic openness. This is a sleight of hand, however. The truth is, every politician and economist ought to know that unrestricted immigration has nothing in the slightest to do with open markets. Nevertheless, the "We need open markets" slogan is used to label those who want controls on immigration as being anti-business. A lack of technical or specialist knowledge is excusable in the case of people who are not really engaged with politics or economics, but not in the case of politicians who make the key decisions. The latter should at least be familiar with the figures.

The fact that the Federal Council's forecasts underestimated the impact of immigration through the free movement of persons by as high a factor as 10 was a serious matter. Now, at least, the federal government should be openly communicating the worldwide record levels of immigration: In 2000, in its voter pamphlet for the "Bilateral Agreements between Switzerland and the European Union" referendum, the Federal Council assumed a net 8,000 to 10,000 immigrants per year. In reality, however, net immigration has totaled around 80,000 people in recent years. Year after year, more than 150,000 new residence permits have been issued – an incredible number for a small country like Switzerland. It's as if the EU issued around 10 million new immigration permits year after year – a figure the EU would never accept.

Immigration via Asylum

In addition to the free movement of persons, i.e. unrestricted – which we can no longer control – immigration from the EU, "immigration via asylum" is becoming increasingly problematic for our country. The example of Kosovo in particular shows the figures that the "asylum conveyor belt" can generate. Today, there are around 200,000 people with a Kosovar "migration background" living in Switzerland. If the Balkan countries join the EU in 5, 10, or 20 years' time, free movement of persons would apply to these countries too. Will we see an extra 100,000, 500,000, or even 1,000,000 coming over from Kosovo alone?

No country can absorb unlimited immigration. Those responsible for our country would do well to think about what the limits should be.

Luzi Stamm is an economist and lawyer. He was the Presiding Judge in Baden in the 1980s, and has been a member of the National Council for 24 years. There Luzi Stamm serves on both the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Legal Committee. Between 2003 and 2007 he was a member of the Council of Europe, where he served on the Migration Committee.