Seismo

Migration and Swiss identity: How much space for the foreign in the familiar?

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Twentyfive years ago, in 1992, the Seville Expo world exhibition took place on the subject of "national identity". The Swiss pavilion presented its country in a rather controversial and provocative way with the slogan "La Suisse n'existe pas" (Switzerland does not exist), created by the artist Ben Vautier.

Today, the topic is even more relevant and up-to-date, probably more so than ever before, as voting results show society to be deeply divided on many aspects of the issue.

Therefore, the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences (SAHSS) launched a series of events under the slogan "La Suisse existe – la Suisse n'existe pas" – one of them dedicated to "Constructing Swiss Identity and Country Image in times of Migration: Integration and Exclusion in Europe" on 20.03.2017 at the University of Fribourg, which sought to reflect on the discursive construction of Swiss identity and country image in the recurrent debates about migration and refugees in Switzerland and Europe.

Diana Ingenhoff, full professor and vice dean at the University of Fribourg who specializes in public diplomacy and organizational communication, opened the conference and introduced the Swiss history on migration discourses and plebiscites as well as her research on country identity and image. Ruth Wodak, Emerita Distinguished Professor at Lancaster University and former full professor at University of Vienna, explored the discursive construction of European identities and the rise of right-wing populism. Julia Metag, associated professor at University of Fribourg who specializes in science and political communication, presented her research on attitudes towards refugees and their relations to media reception. Dr. Camelia Beciu, professor at University of Bucharest in communication sciences and senior researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Romanian Academy, presented an analysis of the contexts and discourses of migration in Europe with respect to Romania and Great Britain. Alina Dolea, former Fulbright Fellow at University of Southern California, associate lecturer at University of Bucharest, Romania, connected the construction of the image of the other with the self-image, resulting in discourses of "sameness" and "difference". Subsequently, Alexander Buhmann, assistant professor at BI Norwegian Business School, gave examples of the handling of refugees in Norway and Sweden.

Switzerland's unique position – geographically at the heart of Europe, yet historically and culturally independent from the European Union – has made it a focal point for the immigration debate. The "cherry picking debate" *(Rosinenpicker-Debatte)*, alleged foreign infiltration and "*Dichtestress*" (overcrowding stress), plebiscites on banning minarets, or the "Mass Immigration Initiative" have not only revealed strong divisions within Switzerland but also been closely monitored by international media. The domestic debates are having a clear impact both on the way Switzerland is seen abroad and how the Swiss see themselves.

By attempting to grasp what we mean when we speak about a country's identity, the difficulties we face become immediately clear: does a collective entity we call Switzerland even exist? A country uniting four languages in a small area and shaped by the most diverse cultures and climes, whose struggle for supremacy between the two major Christian belief systems nearly

broke it apart, yet which has repeatedly put the emphasis on what united the Swiss rather than what divided them. How does a shared historical conscience emerge, how does the media build a common identity of a *"Willensnation"* (a nation created by the people's will and consensus) in the heart of Europe, and which are the dominant discourses?

As shown by research on the national identity, the perceptions about a country – whether internal or external – are shaped by all kinds of generic attributes including functional, ethical-social, aesthetic and affective components. Alongside functional aspects such as a country's economic stability, innovation, power and political leadership, it is also aesthetic components such as the country's beautiful scenery, as well as culture, traditions and charismatic personalities that shape the image of a country. The latter often play an important role in establishing a national identity, as exemplified, for instance, by the persona of Roger Federer: he succeeds as no other sportsperson has done before in linking the story of his success to Swiss attributes (or "clichés") such as modesty and stamina, thereby creating a positive image for Switzerland and acting as an international ambassador for an entire country. This generates a particular payoff in terms of the emotional dimension of the country's image, putting the focus on the friendliness and openness of its inhabitants. These impressions are often partly shaped by an ethical-social dimension, where a country's responsibility towards its citizens and the environment, human rights and humanitarianism play a central role. Here too, Switzerland can boast a long tradition, with Nobel Peace Prize laureates such as Henri Dunant achieving international renown and standing, and institutions such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees being headquartered in Geneva forming part of Switzerland's image.

Yet, the question of how to deal with refugees and migration is dividing the country. The diversity and inner divisions both within the Confederation and its sovereign cantons is particularly evident during the federal plebiscites, which have a long tradition of giving voice to fears of the consequences of migration and putting the spotlight on the issue of identity in various discourses in the media, politics and the general population.[1]

Recently, strongly voiced citizens' fears that refugees and migrants threaten the well-being of society (Bauman, 2016[2]) have joined the fray. The same author posits "responsibility" as a central issue here, describing citizens who feel disconnected from the decision-making process and the democratic process, and the appropriation of the issue by political parties all over Europe.

However, it might be hard to imagine how landmark projects for Swiss cultural identity would have been possible without immigration – think, for example, of the construction of the Gotthard and Simplon tunnels. Nevertheless, the high number of immigrants arriving in the wake of these projects brought the issue of *"Überfremdung"* ("over-foreignization") to the table as early as 1914, when the foreign-born proportion of the population stood at up to 15 per cent, even reaching over 30 per cent in cities such as Geneva and Basel. This provided fertile ground for the beginnings of right-wing populism and the politicization and xenophobic rhetoric of immigration, which saw its first peak in the Schwarzenbach Initiative "Against Floods of Foreigners and Overpopulation"[3]. While in the past the focus was on the Jewish people and Bolsheviks, the main target in the 1970s was Mediterranean migrant workers, with the initiative's goal to limit the share of foreign residents to 10 per cent. On 7 June 1970 the motion was rejected, relatively narrowly, with only 54 per cent, by the men of Switzerland; at that time, women did not yet have the vote. Characterized as more of an outsider personality, James Schwarzenbach at

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1　Wodak, R. (2015). The politics of fear: Understanding the Meanings of Right-wing Populism. London, UK: Sage.

2　Bauman, Z. (2016). Strangers at our door. Cambridge / Malden: Polity.

3　Manatschal, Anita (2015): Switzerland – Really Europe's heart of darkness? In: Swiss Political Science Review 21(1): 23–35.

the time used a rhetoric that from today's perspective seems grotesque, stigmatizing the "brown sons of the South" (usually referring to Italian immigrants) as "foreign plants" and a "creeping disease" threatening direct democracy, Swiss culinary habits and labour relations[4]. Even back then xenophobia served "mainly to cover up the true reasons behind the situation – i.e. a policy providing entrepreneurs with immense wealth on the backs of the workers"[5]. This also shows that the foreigner is always flagged up in terms of creating a distinction, a difference "from us": identity construction is framed and becomes manifest in "who we are" and how this "WE" is defined by language, linguistic behavior and symbols.

Consequently, campaign posters of this and other, similar, initiatives and the language used by politicians not only show how "otherness" is constructed and symbolized – but also how national identity is constructed. These discourses on identity can be characterized by applying the method of critical discourse analysis to 1) the notion of a typical representative of a nation, 2) the narrative of a shared political past, 3) the discursive construction of a shared culture, 4) the discursive construction of a shared present and future, and 5) the discursive construction of the "national body", the state territory (the landscape, architecture and cultural heritage) (Wodak & Meyer, 2009[6]).

The Schwarzenbach initiative was followed by a number of further initiatives against the perceived threat of the foreign, with similar content and rhetoric, such as the "Initiative for the Restriction of Foreign Residents", which aimed to limit the number of annual grants of citizenship to a maximum of 4,000 and to cap foreign

residents at 500,000. On 20 Oct 1974 this initiative was soundly rejected, with 65 per cent of "no" votes. One of the demands of the "Limiting Immigration" initiative was to allow only 90,000 cross-border commuters and to issue no more than 100,000 annual seasonal permits. This initiative was rejected on 4 Dec 1988 with 67 per cent of "no" votes. Plebiscites such as the one "against the mass immigration of foreigners and asylum seekers" (1991), or "for a sensible asylum policy" (1996) failed at the early stage of collecting sufficient signatures or were declared void by Parliament. Eventually, in the 1990s the SVP (Swiss People's Party) took on the mantle of right-wing populist initiatives, for instance with the initiative "against illegal immigration" launched in 1992, which ended up being rejected on 1 December 1996 with 54 per cent of "no" votes. The initiative "against the abuse of the right to asylum" failed only very narrowly on 24 Nov 2000 to gain a popular majority.

Then, on 9 February 2014, the first "Initiative against Mass Immigration" was in fact adopted (albeit with a margin of only 19,500 votes, just 50.3 per cent). Critical of immigration and demanding a restriction of foreigners entering Switzerland through annual caps and quotas, it ran counter to the bilateral contracts with the European Union in terms of freedom of movement, and earned major international attention. The concept that kept cropping up in the debates surrounding the mass immigration initiative was the so-called "overcrowding stress" *(Dichtestress)*, a phenomenon borrowed from biology as the central argument of the threat of a lower quality of life in the most diverse areas – and immediately earned the distinction of the *Unwort* (ugliest, or literally, non-word) of the Year. The result of the plebiscite reflected once again the country's division along what is known as the "Röstigraben", the dividing line defined by the popular Swiss potato dish. In fact, the pattern is similar in nearly all the plebiscites that touch on Switzerland's relationship with foreign countries, with the supporters of limiting immigration in German-speaking Switzerland (with the

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4   Maiolino, Angelo (2011): Als die Italiener noch Tschinggen waren: der Widerstand gegen die Schwarzenbach-Initiative (When the Italians where still the Tschinggens: Resistance against the Schwarzbach Initiative). Rotpunkt-Verlag.

5   https://www.woz.ch/-207d (3.6.10)

6   Wodak, R., de Cillia, R., Reisigl, M., & Liebhart, K. (2009). The discursive construction of national identity. Edinburgh, Scotland: EUP.

exception of Zurich, Zug and Basle) and in the canton of Ticino, the opponents in the French-speaking Romandy part of western Switzerland. A stark division between "yes-voters" and "no-voters" on the initiative became apparent, with a heavily pronounced contrast between city and country: the strongest supporters of the initiative came from those rural regions least affected by pressures on population density, with the strongest opponents in the densely populated cities.

One important question arising here is how countries strategically project images to out-groups (country images) and how these images are perceived by in-groups (country identity). With international media putting a questioning spotlight on Switzerland's model of direct democracy, national media gave voice to two different types of discourses: 1) the unexpected vote as a reflection of a deeply divided society, marking a change in the representation of Swiss identity, 2) while the government tried to explain the result of the vote mainly in terms of respecting "the will of the people" and the consequences of direct democracy. Furthermore, media grant visibility to the collective actor "the Swiss people" and often portray ordinary citizens as representative and symbolic of a multicultural and diverse Switzerland (whether a Geneva resident with Iraqi origins or the children of past immigrants).

The populist discourse works by creating and exaggerating the differences between various categories of Swiss (masses vs. elites; Italian vs. Romands vs. German Swiss; the "yes" voters against the integration of foreigners vs. the "no" voters in favour). Another strategy used is victim-perpetrator inversion, emphasizing a threatened identity and portraying Switzerland as a victim of foreigners/migrants and of the EU. To this end, the Swiss People's Party have started projecting fictitious scenarios suggesting the end of the country and its power to decide its own fate.

Explanations for the result of the vote appear to stem from a growing skepticism towards immigration, once more firmly on the rise since 2012, an identity conflict in terms of to what degree Switzerland should open itself up to the outside world, and the perceived threat of the foreign and a desire to hold on to traditions.[7] The debates have historic precedents, and are by no means a purely Swiss phenomenon. Therefore, it is important to consider the complex macro context, particularly as "often nationalist attitudes and ethnic stereotypes articulated in discourse accompany or even determine political decision-making, and we note with concern the increase in discriminatory acts and exclusionary practices conducted in the name of nationalism in many parts of Europe" (Wodak et al., 2009, p. 1). At the same time, anti-immigrant and, specifically, anti-Muslim prejudice and islamophobia is on the rise both in Europe and the United States (Ogan et al., 2014).

At European level, parties such as France's Front National (FN), Austria's Freedom Party, the Dutch Party for Freedom, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) or the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) enjoy a strong following and are gaining consistently high voting percentages in their national elections. Even in countries historically welcoming of immigration, such as the United States and Australia, the migration issue has been used to stir up fears and to distract from the mistakes of home-grown policies. The only thing that has changed over time is the countries of origin of the "scapegoat" migrants. At the centre of the debates constructed by the media we find, time and again, a desire to hold on to the myth of Swiss traditions and traits which don't really exist in any measurable shape or form. The opportunities created by migration and change are rarely mentioned, nor are we aware of the history, and the obligations to provide protection in accordance with the Geneva Convention on Refugees signed by nearly 150 countries worldwide, but this seems much more needed nowadays.

7　Sciarini, P., A. Nai and A. Tresch (2014): Analyse de la votation fédérale du 9 février 2014. Bern/Geneve: gfs.bern et Universite de Genève.; Abu-Hayyeh, Reem/Fekete, Liz (2014): Swiss referendum: flying the flag for nativism. Race & Class, Vol. 56(1): 89–94.