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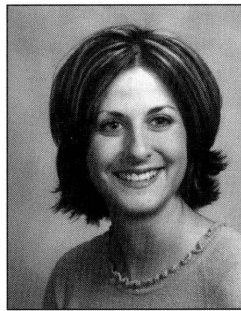
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# IMMIGRATION AND THE POLITICAL SHIFT TO THE RIGHT IN AUSTRIA AND SWITZERLAND

*Beth E. Antonuk*<sup>1</sup>



*Cowbell conservatism or Alpine fascism? There may be disagreement about the label, but a chill wind is certainly gusting down the mountain slopes as a new right-wing populism challenges the political orthodoxies of Europe. The heroes, or anti-heroes, of this rightward lurch are a strange collection of Porsche-driving yuppies, bruisers and highly-strung millionaires. Some, such as Jörg Haider, who is causing such an upheaval in Austria, cannot conceal a sympathy for the work ethic of the Third Reich. Others, such as the Swiss businessman Christoph Blocher, gain votes by denying the Holocaust.... Put them in a room together and you would have the cocktail party from Hell, a roar of egos. Yet somehow these fringe politicians have managed to hit the popular nerve.*

— Roger Boyes

## Introduction

The concept of European national identity is not a static notion, but rather one that has changed throughout history and continues to evolve in a world that is no longer defined solely by geographic boundaries. The movement of peoples from one country to another has characterized the European continent for thousands of years, but the direction of such migration has

changed relatively recently. Whereas most nineteenth and early twentieth century movements were out of Europe and into North America, today's Europe has become an ending point for many immigrant journeys. Factors such as a more globally focused economy, improved communication networks, more international businesses and other institutions, as well as changing political and cultural tides have all contributed to the creation of Europe as a destination for non-native peoples who can be characterized as both immigrants and refugees. (Cesarani, p. 2)

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<sup>1</sup>The author wishes to thank Professor Raymond Bell for his help and advice.

In addition to the factors that have generated an increase in overall European immigration over the past century, a variety of other recent trends and events have occurred, including continental integration in the form of the European Union, the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, and a number of area conflicts that have worked to generate a large influx of immigrants into Austria and Switzerland. These two countries have a highly perceived level of attractiveness to immigrants due to their crucial locations, one on the edge of the former Soviet bloc and the other at the heart of Europe, as well as their tendencies to take neutral stances in the face of conflict. However, immigration has become a very emotional topic for many citizens who see foreigners as a danger to the economic security of their country as well as a threat to their national identity. The issue has turned two traditionally politically stable countries into places of discontent as manifested in recent political elections, showing the support of citizens shifting to far-right politicians running under nationalistic, anti-immigration platforms.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the trends of immigration in both Austria and Switzerland and to determine both the real and perceived effects of the influx of peoples on economic conditions as well as the political environment. The first section discusses the immigration trends, economic conditions, and the recent political victory of the far-right in Austria; the second section explores the same circumstances in Switzerland. A discussion of the similarities within both countries will follow, and the article will conclude with an examination of the potential solutions for both Austria and Switzerland.

## **Austria**

### **Immigration Trends**

Austria is a relatively small country with a population of approximately 8 million. (*Austria Facts and Figures*, p. 7) Of this number, 750,000 are legal immigrants; and it is estimated that an additional 250,000 illegal immigrants reside in Austria, many of whom are political refugees. ("Haider's Reich? Hitler?") These numbers are significant for a country of

this size, and the majority of Austria's current immigrant population can be traced back to a small number of countries — namely the states of the former Soviet Union, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

After forty years of European division created by travel restrictions, deportation regulations, and barbed wire borders, Austria began to see an enormous rise in the number of immigrants immediately following the collapse of the Iron Curtain in 1989. Communist governments fell, travel regulations were removed, and many eastern Europeans abandoned their homes and traveled westward in search of a better future. The influx of immigrants, from former Soviet countries as well as from Austria's southern Slav neighbors, the former Yugoslavia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, can be attributed to Austria's proximity to these countries as well as to the desire of their citizens to live under a stable government and within thriving economic conditions. (Münz) While immigration continues to come from these countries, more recent trends reflect not so much foreigners fleeing to improve their quality of living, but rather refugees fleeing to save their lives.

Images of Kosovar Albanians being violently driven from their homes put pressure on many countries, including Austria, to take in refugees during the 1998-99 conflict with Serbia. It is estimated that more than 10,000 of the 700,000 Kosovo refugees are currently living in Austria under a temporary protection status that expired on December 31, 1999. Additionally, turmoil in the Balkans has resulted in an increased number of refugees fleeing to other European countries. After Germany, Austria hosts the largest number of Bosnian refugees; and it is estimated that of the approximately 90,000 who have arrived since 1992, close to 6,000 were still being supported by the Austrian government at the end of 1997. (*Austrian Foreign Policy Yearbook*, p. 135) That these refugees are still residing in Austria on government assistance, despite the fact that they are now able to return to their own countries, has not only created conflicts within the local and national governments that bear the financial duty to support them, but has also produced feelings of resentment from Austrian

citizens who see such foreigners as a threat to their own stable economy. These fears are similar to those that Austrians express in the face of expansion of the European Union.

As the EU plans to expand to include such eastern European countries as the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary, Austria faces a new threat from a different type of immigrant. Although resident refugees are an important issue due to their reliance on various assistance programs, the government is currently able to restrict their entry into the Austrian workforce through use of a highly bureaucratic application system. Therefore, they do not pose a competitive threat to Austrian citizens in the way that other EU citizens in a border-free Europe do. The main danger facing Austrian citizens is the influx of cheap labor in the form of daily and weekly commuters to Austria, a country that controls more than one-third of the European Union's external borders with countries seeking membership. (Hall) These economic fears are very real in Austria, a country with an historically stable and flourishing economy as well as a tradition of nationalism.

### **Economic Indicators and Austrian Perceptions**

Despite the fears expressed by citizens, statistics indicate that Austria continues to be one of Europe's most prosperous nations. Largely due to rising exports to eastern Europe, annual GDP growth reached 2.75 percent in 1998 while inflation remained relatively stable at about 1.5 percent per year. (*OECD Economic Survey: Austria*, pp. 15–24) While this thriving economy can be attributed largely to Austria's entry into the new markets of eastern Europe, one might ask why the country would not anticipate capitalizing on those opportunities created through European Union expansion. But although Austria stands to benefit economically due to its central location in an expanded European Union, it is also the country with the most potential to be negatively affected by such a change. (Hall)

Threats to job security coming both from refugees and job seekers from EU countries are the most apparent dangers of immigration facing Austrians today. Although the expansion of

businesses into eastern Europe helped to create more than 100,000 new jobs for Austrians over the past decade, the country has experienced a significant increase in unemployment which grew from 5 percent to 7.2 percent in the period from 1989 to 1998. (Hall) Logically, those who feel the most threatened are the lower-class, blue-collar workers who stand to lose the most in terms of employment. Without specialized skills, this group is the most likely to be replaced by immigrants and refugees offering labor at significantly lower wages. It is out of this fear that resentment towards immigrants has grown. As a result, scapegoating and blame for unrelated problems, particularly crime, have appeared. ("Far-Right Populism Spreads Its Wings") This backlash can be measured by monitoring public opinion in Austria, but perhaps a better indicator is the dramatic shift to the political right that has occurred in recent elections.

### **The Austrian Parliamentary Democracy**

The Austrian system of government is defined as a parliamentary democracy by the Federal Constitution. The head of the Austrian state is the federal president, who is elected by popular vote. The president serves as the country's international representative of the people, and the duties of this position include the signing of treaties and the swearing in of government officials. Another presidential duty is to oversee the assembly of the Austrian Parliament, which is divided into two houses. The Nationalrat, or lower house, is comprised of 183 delegates who are elected based on the proportional representation of political parties, while the Bundesrat, or upper house, in which representation is by province based on relative population size, has 64 members. The main duties of the Nationalrat are to approve federal legislation and any new government while the Bundesrat, whose representatives are sent from the parliaments of individual provinces, has the power to challenge and demand a new vote on any issue that passes the lower house. The fourth key component in the Austrian political system is the federal government, which is comprised of the chancellor, vice-chancellor and cabinet members who conduct

any activities that fall outside the responsibility of the president. Since only the federal ministers have a vote in the federal government, the party composition of the government is a key indicator of the political decisions that will be made by the state. (*Austria Facts and Figures*, pp. 44–46)

There are five main parties active in Austrian politics today. Traditionally, the strongest political party, the center-left Social Democrats currently led by Viktor Klima, and the center-right People's Party, under the leadership of Wolfgang Schüssel, have held the majority in the Austrian Parliament and have led the federal government in what is often referred to as the "grand coalition" since 1987. Throughout the past thirteen years, the far-right Freedom Party under Jörg Haider has taken a less prominent role in the federal government along with the Greens and Liberal Forum. ("Austrian Far-Right Ties...") But as the 1999 Nationalrat elections drew near, a potential swing to the political right threatened the stable government of Austria.

On October 3, in what has been called the most dramatic election since 1945, Austria's far-right Freedom Party defeated the People's Party by finishing second in the general election by 415 out of 4.62 million possible votes. Since the Freedom and People's Party each won 26.9 percent of the vote, both parties were awarded 52 parliamentary seats, with the Social Democrats and Greens receiving 65 and 14 of the 183 seats, respectively. ("Austrian Far-Right Ties...") With the significant gain in the Freedom Party's popularity, however, came nationwide concern over the controversial far-right views of the party as expressed by its leader.

### Haider's Victory of the Right

Jörg Haider, who took over the Freedom Party in 1985 when it seemed close to losing parliamentary presence, is known as the "bad boy" of the Austrian political scene. A charismatic leader, Haider has been known to dress for his audience in outfits ranging from traditional Austrian *lederhosen* to trendy designer clothes to the running shorts worn when he participated in the New York Marathon. (Frey, "A Dangerous Chameleon") But Haider's abil-

ity to appeal to his supporters has not been enough to overshadow his direct manner of speaking or his rather controversial past. Haider has called Africans "drug dealers" and "seducers" while he has referred to Russians as "black-mailers" and "muggers." As the son of a father who acted as a minor Nazi official and a mother with membership in the League of German Maidens, Haider might find it difficult to escape accusations that he holds neo-Nazi sentiments even without his praise of Hitler's employment policies and speeches upholding the bravery of Nazi stormtroopers. ("Haider's Reich? Hitler?") But when asked if he held neo-Nazi ideals, Haider responded:

I am a democratic politician and I have never violated democratic principles. I never have sympathized with the ideas of the Nazi regime. There have been misunderstandings. I am a patriot who promotes Austrian interests.

("Haider Met by Protest in London")

Haider's platform can be described as a "mixed bag" of expensive social programs including increased benefits for families with children and a 23 percent flat tax in addition to the far-right ideals that have come to define his party. Haider advocates a total ban on immigration and is strongly opposed to the expansion of the European Union. Additionally, he calls for harsher criminal sentencing and the deportation of foreigners convicted of crimes on Austrian soil. (Frey, "Austria Coalition Fatigue...") These political plans, along with his rather eccentric personality and shadowy past, combine to give Haider his controversial image.

Regardless of any arguments presented against Jörg Haider as an individual, the dramatic increase in public support for his far-right ideas in Austria cannot be ignored. Haider was able to appeal to two primary classes of citizens in generating votes for his party. Although some voters cited disappointment with the ruling "grand coalition" as their reason for supporting the Freedom Party, a number of votes came from blue-collar workers who were previously associated with the Social Democrats. It is estimated that, among trade union members, the percentage voting for the Social Democrats has fallen from 62 to 49 percent over the past ten years while support among these

workers for the Freedom Party has nearly doubled. (Frey, "A Dangerous Chameleon") Since this class of workers stands to lose a great deal with the influx of cheap labor into the Austrian market, it is highly likely that it was Haider's strict anti-immigration views and policies against EU expansion that swayed their votes. In effect, Haider was able to vocalize the fear of economic change being forced on Austria from outside; and exit polls showed that Haider's *Auslaenderpolitik*, or policy towards foreigners, was the primary factor in the decision of nearly 50 percent of Austrian voters. (Engel) In addition to the needs and concerns of Austrian citizens, Haider's electoral success has also put the stability of the Austrian federal government into jeopardy.

### **The Impact of the Austrian Right: Instability and Isolation**

For the first time in more than 50 years, three large political parties of similar size dominate the Austrian political scene instead of just two. And although parliamentary success does not guarantee a seat in the federal government, new coalition agreements have effectively destroyed the system that was established to keep far-right ideas out of Austrian politics. (Hall, "Elections Expose Flaw in Mould") Although the People's Party leader, Wolfgang Schüssel, expressed soon after the elections that he intended to abide by his pre-election pledge to refuse party participation in government if they fell to third place, negotiations with Haider caused Schüssel to abandon these assurances. With no majority party, Austria appeared to be ungovernable immediately following the October 1999 elections when the People's Party and the Social Democrats could not agree to reestablish their coalition. ("Austrian Far-Right Ties...") And as the country contemplated a variety of solutions, ranging from operating under a weak minority government to holding new elections, negotiations resulted in the establishment of an unlikely partnership between the Freedom Party and the People's Party in which Schüssel would assume the role of Chancellor while a representative of Haider's party would serve as Vice-Chancellor. The announcement of the new Austrian govern-

ment put the Social Democrats out of the ruling position for the first time in thirty years; but more importantly, as international responses would soon indicate, this situation marked the first time since World War II that a western European government has included far-right political views. (Karacs)

Although both party leaders signed a declaration renouncing Austria's past Nazi associations in order to affirm their commitment to democracy and human rights issues, this has done little to calm the concerns of many Austrian citizens and international bodies alike. European residents have expressed their fears in the form of protests, which turned violent on occasion. Meanwhile, Austria's fourteen European Union partners stood by their pre-coalition threat to impose bilateral political sanctions should the People's Party form a coalition with Haider. As explained by Italy's prime minister, Massimo d'Alema, the decision is equivalent to putting the country in a state of quarantine by barring high-level contracts with Austrian ambassadors and excluding Austrian officials from high-level positions in EU institutions. (Frey, "A Cuckoo in the Nest...") Although the EU has never before tried to impose its opinion as to what type of government a member country should or should not form, the commission felt that isolation was the only policy with the potential to collapse the current coalition. ("Poker Game") At the time of this writing, the effectiveness of the EU's strategic decision could not yet be determined since the interpretation of a variety of indicators would allow an outside observer to declare victory for either side.

While the decision to interfere in a country's domestic affairs is unprecedented in the history of the EU, Austria is a nation that has previously experienced international isolation. The country faced a similar upheaval after electing Kurt Waldheim, a former UN secretary-general who was found to have been involved in the deportation of Jews to concentration camps during World War II. (Lawson) And just as Waldheim's popularity with Austrian citizens grew with outside pressure to remove him from office, so did support for Haider's Freedom Party immediately following the parliamentary elections and amidst a great deal of interna-

tional criticism and threats of isolation. A national poll revealed that the Freedom Party's support had grown from 27 percent in the October elections to 33 percent in late January 2000. (Castle) But in this state of increasing political consensus, the Freedom Party underwent a major transformation whose implications are subject to interpretation.

Facing EU sanctions and increasing negative publicity, Jörg Haider resigned his position as the leader of the Austrian Freedom Party on February 28, 2000. Although no one knows the motives of the politician who is famous for his strategic political maneuvers, speculations ran rampant not only in Austria, but throughout the rest of the world. When his coalition partner, Wolfgang Schüssel, claimed that Haider's resignation provided an example of his effort to ease the tensions created by the rightward political shift in the European Union, Haider himself stated that his actions stemmed from a desire to dispel the rumors that he would serve as the "Shadow Chancellor" in his position as Governor of Carinthia. And since Haider has admitted that he will continue to advise the party which is now under the control of Austria's new Vice-Chancellor and long-time Haider loyalist, Susanne Riess-Passer, perhaps his resignation was simply a tactical maneuver designed to dispel some of the negative attention while effectively maintaining the same position of control over Austrian politics. (Hammer) Despite these reassurances, the international instinct seems to be that these actions are Haider's way of separating himself from the reforms proposed by the new government in order to gain power in the future. Since policies like public spending cuts and a higher retirement age are unpopular among Austrian citizens, Haider will be able to once again sweep onto the political scene in the 2004 elections by appealing to the new issues deemed important by the Austrian citizens in the same way in which he capitalized on recent concerns of over-foreignization and feelings of discontent with the ruling coalition expressed by the voting public. ("Poker Game") But if Haider's hope was to disappear from center stage and take some of the international pressure away from his country, perhaps his methods have been ineffective.

Although sources throughout the world

point to Jörg Haider as the right-wing problem in Austria, the European Union has declared that the issue is not simply the individual, but rather the ideals of the Freedom Party as represented by its leader. (Ladika) Therefore, despite Haider's resignation, the EU has pledged to continue with its isolation of Austria for as long as the Freedom Party maintains its role in government. And unfortunately for Austrian citizens, the damage done by Haider seems to be irreversible in the short run. Ironically, although Austrians cited fear of economic instability from the threat of foreigners as a prime reason for electing the Freedom Party and its anti-immigration platform, it is only now that the country is truly experiencing a threat to its position as one of the most prosperous European nations. With negative publicity on the rise, the country faces a decline in its tourism industry, which is already being realized. For example, a large medical convention scheduled to be held in Innsbruck was canceled in an action intended as a form of protest against Austria's acceptance of far-right politics. Additionally, the new government's economic program, which relies heavily on privatization, is threatened by the negative opinions of foreign investors towards the ruling coalition. As Wilfried Stadler, a former financial officer with the Austrian People's Party, noted, "The price that the economy has to pay for [Haider] is too high... The damage will be measurable soon." (Hammer)

Although no one can predict the immediate political future or its economic implications for Austria, what is known is that the country is facing a term of uncertainty in stark contrast to its traditional stability. And unfortunately for both Austrian citizens and the rest of the world, each potential solution seems to carry prospects graver than the current turmoil facing the political environment and the economy. Since the European Union has stood by its strategy of international isolation for dissolving the coalition, many fear that this will increase anti-Europe sentiments already in existence throughout the country. In this traditionally nationalistic state, voters will undoubtedly express concern over their sovereignty when EU membership provides non-Austrian leaders with the ability to dictate how Austrians can express their individual opinions over domestic issues, namely immigration, at the polls. If

citizens feel as though their political statements, in the form of ruling leaders, are being attacked, this will simply reinforce Haider's nationalistic views and increase his already rising popularity. (Pfaff)

In addition to the public sentiment in response to the threat of international isolation, the negative effects on the economy will succeed in strengthening Haider's anti-immigration platform, which relies on the premise of keeping Austrian wealth for native Austrian citizens. In effect, the very strategies adopted to decrease the Freedom Party's power are now helping their ideas to grow. And since the stability of the ruling coalition has been in question from the time of its formation, the threat of Haider as chancellor becomes an unlikely, but nonetheless frightening, concern with the risk of a government collapse.

While the current situation in Austria has gained the attention of media due largely to the charismatic nature of the Freedom Party leader and his ability to negotiate a position in a ruling coalition, what is perhaps more interesting is the fact that the shift to the political right is not one unique to the government of Austria. In fact, this rightward trend has been felt in a number of European countries, including Switzerland, whose political and economic environment possesses many parallels to those of Austria.

## Switzerland

### Immigration Trends

Another relatively small European country, Switzerland had an estimated population of 7.09 million at the beginning of 1998. (*Switzerland*, p. 21) The country attributes its marked growth in population, an eight percent increase between 1980 and 1990 followed by a five percent increase over the past decade, to increased immigration movements. Almost one in every five inhabitants of Switzerland is a foreigner, and the country has the highest number of asylum-seekers per resident of all western European countries. (Benini, p. 121) While most immigration prior to 1980 can be attributed to the country's call for employees to satisfy its labor-intensive business environment, more recent migratory movements have not

consisted of recruited workers, but rather economic migrants seeking a better way of life and refugees seeking asylum or safety from their war-torn countries. An additional change in Swiss immigration during the past decade is that immigrants are no longer coming only from surrounding countries. According to 1990 census data, while the percentage of foreigners from countries surrounding Switzerland has dropped by nearly 43 percent since 1960, the percentages of immigrants from other, non-bordering European countries and other nations throughout the world have grown by approximately 32 percent and 11 percent, respectively. (Benini, pp. 121-22)

Part of this dramatic increase can be attributed to countries (e.g. Germany) which have tightened their own restrictions on immigrants and refugees by declaring that those individuals coming from countries not classified as sites of political persecution must be returned to their homes. According to Jean-Noel Wetterwald, a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees representative in Germany, "There is a clear tendency towards more restrictions everywhere. The fear is that if you are more liberal than your neighbor, you will get all the refugees." (Hargreaves) And although adopting such a policy has helped Germany to reduce its immigrant population, it has put an increased burden on surrounding countries, such as Switzerland. In total, it is estimated that Switzerland is home to over 1.3 million non-natives, with former Yugoslavians and Kosovar Albanians as the two most visible groups. (*UNHCR*)

In contrast to Austria, which currently faces immigration issues dealing primarily with the influx of cheap labor due to its location at the heart of the expanding European Union and its borders with the former Soviet bloc, asylum-seekers constitute the majority of immigrants in Switzerland today. It is estimated that the country currently houses a community of Kosovar Albanian refugees totaling more than 150,000 persons holding both regular and long-term residence permits. In line with the German policy, Switzerland has begun to revise its own system of asylum in order to make it less attractive to prospective residents. For the Kosovar Albanians, this means lack of access to



the Swiss labor market for a period of one year as well as generous financial assistance provided to those returning to their homeland prior to May 31, 2000. (UNHCR) And although the Swiss backlash against foreigners is in many respects a result of xenophobia, many citizens still see immigrants as an economic threat and blame them for crime and unemployment. ("Far-Right Populism Spreads Its Wings") Swiss citizens made these fears known in the same manner as the Austrian public in the country's parliamentary elections.

### **Economic Indicators and Swiss Perceptions**

Although the citizens of Switzerland cite economic pressures as the reason for their anti-immigration views, the country is far richer than most of its European neighbors despite the fact that the economy has been more or less stagnant since 1990. Although Switzerland's GDP fell by 0.7 percent in 1996, largely due to a significant reduction in government spending in an attempt to reduce budget deficits, inflation has remained low, at just over 1 percent. (*OECD Economic Survey: Switzerland*, pp. 15–21) Without actual economic growth, however, the threat of foreigners has become an issue of major importance to Swiss citizens, who have traditionally held a fear of the outside world and a desire to preserve the prosperity of their country for its natives.

In the face of rising unemployment, particularly among blue-collar workers, Swiss citizens fear that the entry of more immigrants will further endanger the stability of the labor market. While the Swiss employment rate rose by 0.8 percent in 1996, the number of employed foreigners declined by nearly 1.7 percent, with the fall most pronounced among seasonal workers. These declines are attributed to the increasing number of unskilled workers in the foreign workforce and the large concentration of such employees in industries like construction, hotels, and catering, which have suffered the most due to decreases in Swiss spending. (*OECD Economic Survey: Switzerland*, pp. 22–25) But while these effects have been felt within the foreign workforce, they have also affected the Swiss unskilled labor force, whose main job competition comes from these immigrant and refugee

workers who have been blamed for more than economic conditions. As in Austria, the Swiss also made these concerns evident at the voting booths on October 24, 1999.

### **The Democratic Federal State of Switzerland**

The state of Switzerland is comprised of the Federal Assembly, or Parliament, and the Federal Council, which is referred to as the government. (*Switzerland*, p. 33) The Swiss Parliament is composed of two chambers, the 200-member National Council, which represents the people, and the Council of States, which draws two representatives from each canton and one member from each half-canton. The composition of the National Council is based on proportional representation, and each canton and half-canton has at least one member. Every federal law has to be passed by both chambers, which come together every four years to elect the Federal Council, from which a different president is elected each year. (*Switzerland*, pp. 36–38)

The seven officers of the Federal Council are responsible for presiding over all Federal Departments, drafting legislation, and mobilizing armed forces as needed. (*Switzerland*, p. 38) Although never written into law, the present composition of the Federal Council was established in 1959 by members of the Swiss Parliament and has been followed since that time. According to this "magic formula," each of the four traditional parties in Swiss politics are represented, with the Radical Democrats, Social Democrats and Christian Democrats each with two seats and the People's Party, typically the party receiving the least support from voters, with one member. ("Swiss Swing to Right Dims...") But the 1999 parliamentary elections threatened to dissolve this forty-year tradition, as well as the overall stability of the Swiss government.

In the general election for the Federal Assembly, far-right politics extended its presence onto Switzerland's traditionally moderate political stage. The right-wing Swiss People's Party, under the leadership of the party's most prominent figure, Christoph Blocher, generated the largest number of votes in the election and took the second highest number of parliamentary

seats. The People's Party won 22.8 percent of the vote, up from just 5.1 percent in the 1998 election, and was therefore given 44 seats for the term lasting from 2000 to 2004. The Social Democrats, after losing 3 seats, were able to continue as the largest party with 51 seats. The Radical Democrats were left with 43 seats while 35 members represented the Christian Democrats. The remaining 27 seats were split between members of the Greens and other parties of the extreme right and left. ("Blocher's Swiss People's Party...") The success of the far-right presents a variety of problems for Switzerland, whose system of federal government provides only one seat in the federal government to the party that generated the most public support. But although Christoph Blocher called for further political representation for his party in the federal system, politicians and Swiss citizens alike question the ideals of the Swiss People's Party representative.

### **Blocher's Victory of the Right**

Christoph Blocher, the leader of the People's Party Zurich branch, is a successful businessman and a right-wing politician whose party soared from fourth to first place in terms of popularity among the Swiss electorate. The fifty-nine-year-old Swiss-German is the son of a pastor who distinguished himself in Swiss politics with his intense debating style and persuasive ability. (Capella) But while Blocher has met with success at the polls, neither his person nor his platform has gone without criticism; and he has been accused of harboring Nazi sympathies after praising a book denying the Holocaust and for criticizing Jewish boycotts of Swiss banks. ("The Far-Right Stuff") In addition to his support of tax cuts, Blocher's platform included anti-immigration views and an opposition to the expansion of the European Union, both of which worked to support his reputed xenophobic tendencies.

In exploring the reasons behind Switzerland's dramatic shift to the political right, it is essential to examine the motivation behind the public's dramatic increase in support for the People's Party. Despite the fact that Blocher attributes his victory to the desire of the Swiss electorate to eliminate a dominant

party system, the proportion of votes he received indicates that the party's stance on immigration played the primary role in gathering the support of the public. The party's main appeal to voters came from Blocher's ability to exploit feelings of alienation stemming from the increased number of immigrants and asylum seekers entering the country. These sentiments seemed to be strongest among the German-speaking population living in the eastern and central portions of the country, who comprise 64 percent of the entire Swiss population. Almost all of the party's increased support came from the German-Swiss, typically the most loyal supporters of the People's Party, whose primary concerns center around refugee and security issues. ("Swiss Voters Hand...") Since a higher-than-normal proportion of votes came from the French-speaking Swiss who do not support Blocher's anti-EU sentiments, many Swiss fear that the victory of the People's Party will generate strong feelings of resentment among the French-Swiss in the west, whose primary election concerns involved social programs more than immigration issues. ("Rightwinger Leading in Swiss Polls") Together with the potential threat of tension between the linguistic communities living in Switzerland, Blocher's far-right victory also put a strain on the stability of the Swiss government under the traditional "magic formula."

### **The Impact of the Swiss Right: Opposition and Uncertainty**

When the composition of the Swiss Federal Council was established in 1959, it was done in accordance with the traditional popularity of the four primary parties in Swiss politics. In 1999, when the People's Party became the most popular in Switzerland instead of the fourth largest, a variety of challenges arose, posing a threat to the prevailing system of Swiss government. Immediately following the elections, as Swiss politicians fought to save their tradition of consensus governance, Christoph Blocher took action to position himself as a second representative of his party in government. He had threatened to remove his party from government if a seat previously reserved for a Christian Democrat was not freed; and for a

number of weeks Switzerland was faced with the dilemma of either abandoning a system of government that had served the country for forty years or of dealing with potential political stalemate if Blocher decided to lead a large percentage of parliament into opposition. (Capella)

Despite his ardent attempts, Blocher failed to secure for his party an additional voice in the Swiss government. The mid-December vote of the Swiss Parliament resulted in the re-election of the seven current members of the government, which demonstrated their desire to maintain the status quo as defined by the "magic formula." And although Blocher indicated to media sources that he was "extremely disappointed" with the results, Swiss political analyst Christoph Glauser explained that mobilizing his forces as an opposition party put Blocher in an even better position to pursue his political strategies since the coalition governs by consensus. (Millar)

Even though a unified front of the Social Democrats, Radical Democrats and Christian Democrats in Parliament prevented the People's Party from obtaining a second seat in the Swiss government, many feel that prolonging the entry of the far-right party will only serve to create bigger problems in the future. According to Jean-Yves Camus, an expert with the European Center for Research and Action on Racism and Anti-Semitism, denying the People's Party further representation in government and forcing them into political opposition will only work to strengthen the power of the party. ("Far-Right Populism Spreads Its Wings") Denying the presence and importance of the right-wing sentiment will increase and strengthen the very feelings of alienation towards which Blocher's party appealed in order to generate voter support. It is not evident where the spread of far-right politics in Switzerland will end, but what is apparent is that the country is faced with a potential political crisis as Blocher's popularity continues to grow.

## **The Future of the European Right**

In many respects, Austria and Switzerland are comparable countries that share a number of similarities in the face of challenges within Europe today. They are two of the continent's

richest countries, both with relatively low rates of crime and unemployment and traditionally stable political environments. While both nations have opened their doors to a large number of immigrants and refugees, in recent years Austria and Switzerland have seen a resurgence of nationalistic feelings that have grown into resentment towards foreigners, who are seen as a threat to the nations' wealth and security. These factors, combined with an overall disenchantment with the consensus politics that have governed for decades, have set the stage for the entrance of charismatic leaders who can exploit the discontent of the people and declare foreigners and seasoned politicians as the sources of such problems. ("Far-Right Populism Spreads Its Wings") Indeed, in both countries right-wing leaders have emerged who were able to exploit the political scene and appeal to the electorate's feelings of apprehension and isolation, causing a dramatic shift in the political climate of traditional, coalition governments.

Although there are some who argue that the victories of Jörg Haider and Christoph Blocher only demonstrate the Austrian and Swiss desires to break the established systems of dominant coalition governments, others see the 1999 election results as a wake-up call to both countries where governments must respond to the voices of their constituencies. Blocher's success in Switzerland, which so closely followed Haider's Austrian victory, has prompted a number of comparisons between the two men. Both running on anti-immigration platforms and against the expansion of the European Union, Haider and Blocher have been accused of harboring Nazi sympathies. ("Austria's Haider Hails Swiss Right's Success") The two men brought their parties to victory after being written off as minority parties of little significance; and, in what is perhaps the most significant comparison between the two, both have shown that they have substantial popular support.

With two significant parties backing virtually identical far-right, nationalistic policies, Austria and Switzerland must reestablish the political stability of their governments or risk the dangers associated with the further spread of such ideology throughout Europe. Although Austria and Switzerland are two of the smallest

European nations with relatively little influence in terms of the international economy or world politics, the European shift to the political right is not limited to these two nations. Belgium's most prominent neo-fascist, Vlaams Blok, established his party as the most popular in the country's second largest city, Antwerp, while other far-right parties have obtained at least 15 percent of public support in France, Italy and Norway. Indeed, western Europe's 50 million poor, 18 million unemployed and 3 million homeless are setting the stage for extreme right parties who are able to capitalize on citizens' feelings of discontent. (Lee) If far-right parties were successful in dominating the political scene in two of Europe's most prosperous nations while obtaining substantial support in several others, there is little evidence to indicate that they lack the power to expand their ideas into other EU countries as well as into eastern Europe where economic conditions are considerably worse and nationalistic feelings tend to be high.

According to a recent poll conducted by the European Monitoring Center on Racism and Xenophobia, 66 percent of EU citizens consider themselves "a little racist" while 33 percent claim to be "very racist." (Wesolowsky) It is these individuals who blame the continent's more than 16 million immigrants and refugees for taking the jobs of native citizens, raising the crime rates, and monopolizing welfare programs. Even if these claims were true, however, European citizens in countries like Austria and Switzerland fail to recognize that the future of their economies relies on continuous immigration. Immigrants have traditionally taken jobs that citizens consider to be menial, and population trends in Europe indicate that the member states will increasingly rely on a non-native workforce to fill jobs as the aging population grows and already low birth rates continue to decline. In fact, a recent United Nations study revealed that the European Union needs an influx of more than 40 million immigrants before the year 2025 in order to avoid a decline in their workforce numbers. (Echikson) These facts are a reality for the future of the European and international economy as well, but unfortunately they are not readily apparent to those expressing xenopho-

bic tendencies in support of the parties led by Jörg Haider in Austria and Christoph Blocher in Switzerland.

As a result of increased migratory movements and the problems that have resulted throughout the continent, the European Union has expressed a desire to create a common immigrant and refugee policy for all EU countries. A major problem when dealing with European immigration is the lack of consistency in the definitions of those seeking asylum versus immigrants fleeing their country for reasons other than personal safety. Application procedures also differ among countries, and some adopt guidelines to act as deterrents, ranging from denial of entrance into the workforce to physical detainment, in order to make their countries less attractive to immigrants. Therefore, the major goal of the policy is to create specifications for defining and accepting foreigners as well as the provision of financial assistance for those governments taking in greater numbers. (Hargreaves) Such an approach would help to amend the current situation in which large numbers of immigrants and refugees enter those countries with more liberal policies while those with strict guidelines avoid the associated economic and political implications of acceptance. Unfortunately for European immigrants and refugees as well as the individual countries involved, although the European Union is aware of the severity of the problems facing Europe, it is not likely that a policy will be established any time in the near future. Even if it were to be, it would do little to repair the turmoil currently in existence within Austria, Switzerland, and other European countries in which far-right politics have spread.

If Europe is to successfully face its era of proposed integration, the European Union must recognize that it is essential to identify the source of these beliefs and dispel the myths that have allowed far-right politics to dominate several of its member states. Since the majority of far-right support comes from the blue-collar workforce, perhaps this would be the best group to target with a different message. Just before Austrian citizens voted on whether to join the European Union, a large percentage of the electorate was undecided. While the Greens

and the Freedom Party lobbied against entrance, the ruling coalition took a proactive approach by going well beyond the usual media campaigns used in Austrian politics. The government went to plants and construction sites to tell workers about the increased business potential created by expanded markets. The result was a 65 percent majority voting for entrance into the European Union. (Engel) Both countries stand to benefit by reaching these workers again to eliminate the misconceptions regarding the threats posed by immigrants as well as the future dependency of both countries on a foreign workforce. Since claims of fascism and efforts at international isolation have only worked to further the popularity of the Freedom and People's Parties in Austria and Switzerland, presenting citizens with accurate pictures of the economy, both in terms of current and future conditions, may be the best defense against the anti-immigration platforms set forth by politicians like Haider and Blocher. Rubens Ricupero, head of the U.N. Conference on Trade and Development, feels that the way to control the spread of far-right politics is to ensure that the people are aware that European expansion benefits the ordinary citizen socially and economically. (Wesolowsky) Far-right parties successfully appealed to this class of citizens in the 1999 parliamentary elections, while the liberal parties that once controlled government relied on platforms tailored to appeal to the more prominent, well-off voters. As demonstrated in the 1999 parliamentary elections in Switzerland and Austria, however, this is not a strategy that should be used to win votes. Since

that damage has already been done, it is now in the hands of the ruling governments and the European Union to work towards eliminating the tarnished national images gained by electing accused Nazi sympathizers into positions of power. But with both countries sitting idly by while international criticism increases and internal far-right politics grow, it is likely that they will have to deal with deeper consequences stemming from the spread of xenophobia in the future.

## **Conclusion**

Only the future can determine the implications of the expansion of far-right politics for Austria and Switzerland. Even if some compare the threat of these far-right ideas to the growing popularity of Hitler in the 1930s, it is not likely that Haider and Blocher will create similar situations. Both individuals harbor extreme nationalistic tendencies, but their goals center on isolation as opposed to world conquest and racial purity. ("The Ghost of Fascism...") Therefore, although it is unlikely that Europe will see a resurgence of the Third Reich, the rise in the popularity of far-right ideas should not be ignored. Since it is likely that the numbers of immigrants and refugees will continue to rise in the future due to an expanding European Union as well as the continued presence of factors that have brought about migratory movements in the past, Austria and Switzerland must amend their current situations or face the threats of international isolation and political uncertainty.

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