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### Switzerland's Non-EU Immigrants: Their Integration and Swiss Attitudes

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June 1, 2009

Over the past few decades, Switzerland — which brought over thousands of guest workers from southern Europe after World War II — has also become home to a large population from the Balkans, along with immigrants from Asia and Africa.

Many originally came to Switzerland seeking protection, in contrast to Switzerland's other, more numerous foreign residents: present-day European Union (EU) and European Free Trade Association (EFTA) citizens who came to work in Switzerland either as guest workers or under a bilateral agreement that since 2002 allows EU/EFTA citizens to live and work freely in the country (the European Union has 27 Member States while EFTA has four including Switzerland).

In 2008, Switzerland had over 1.6 million foreign residents according to official government statistics, or 21.4 percent of the country's total population (foreign residents do not include naturalized immigrants but do include those born in Switzerland to foreign-national parents). An average of 40,000 foreigners has naturalized each year since 2002.

Foreigners' sizeable share of the population sets Switzerland apart from other European countries, as does the makeup of this group. Of those 1.6 million foreign residents, 62.6 percent were from EU/EFTA countries, mainly Italy and Germany.

Although the majority of Italian and Spanish citizens in Switzerland have lived in the country for 20 years or more or were born there, free movement has meant a more than 50 percent increase in the annual flow of EU-27 citizens to Switzerland between 2005 and 2007. In 2008 alone, 113,235 EU/EFTA citizens immigrated to Switzerland.

The other 38.4 percent (612,454) of foreign residents came from non-EU/EFTA countries, more than half of them (or 20.1 percent of the total) from four countries of the former Yugoslavia, mostly from Serbia (12.0 percent of all foreign residents) but also Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Croatia. Many from Serbia are Kosovars.

Despite non-EU/EFTA immigrants' smaller share of foreign residents, native Swiss have had a mixed response to their presence. In a country known for its neutrality and civil civic discourse, the public and political rhetoric over non-EU/EFTA immigration, particularly the asylum channel, has, at times, been heated in recent years.

For instance, the right-wing Swiss People's Party (SVP) received international attention for its anti-immigrant campaign in late 2007. More recently, the party has proposed banning the construction of minarets.

This article examines recent data on non-EU/EFTA citizens in Switzerland, integration indicators and policies, policy changes that have affected non-EU/EFTA citizens, and political rhetoric and public opinion.

#### Recent Non-EU/EFTA Immigration Numbers

By the 1980s, Switzerland began receiving an increasing number of asylum applications. In the early 1990s, applicants included tens of thousands from Bosnia and Kosovo fleeing war in the former Yugoslavia.

Iraqi Kurds came during the 1990-1991 Persian Gulf War and Saddam Hussein's regime while Congolese started arriving in higher numbers in the 1990s as the war in the Democratic Republic of Congo became increasingly bloody.

But among all recent immigrants, the path to Switzerland has not been through recognized refugee status or asylum. Between 1998 and 2007, 39.4 percent of all immigrants came to reunify with family members who were either foreign residents or Swiss nationals, 25.2 percent for employment, and 12.4 percent to receive professional training.

Switzerland limits the number of non-EU/EFTA citizens who may come to Switzerland to work each year; these third-state nationals have to be highly skilled and may only be admitted if no qualified Swiss or EU/EFTA nationals can be recruited.

In 2008, the largest group of foreigners to receive residence/work permits came from India (2,630 permits, mainly IT professionals), followed by US nationals (1,665 permits) and Canadian nationals (605 permits) employed by multinational companies.

Of Switzerland's 679,232 non-EU/EFTA foreign residents in 2007, about 196,000 were from Serbia and Montenegro, 109,000 from Asia, 75,400 from Turkey, and 66,600 from Africa (see Table 1).

Native-born foreigners — also known as the second generation — made up 22.3 percent of the foreign-resident population at the end of 2007; 62 percent of these native-born foreign residents were EU nationals.

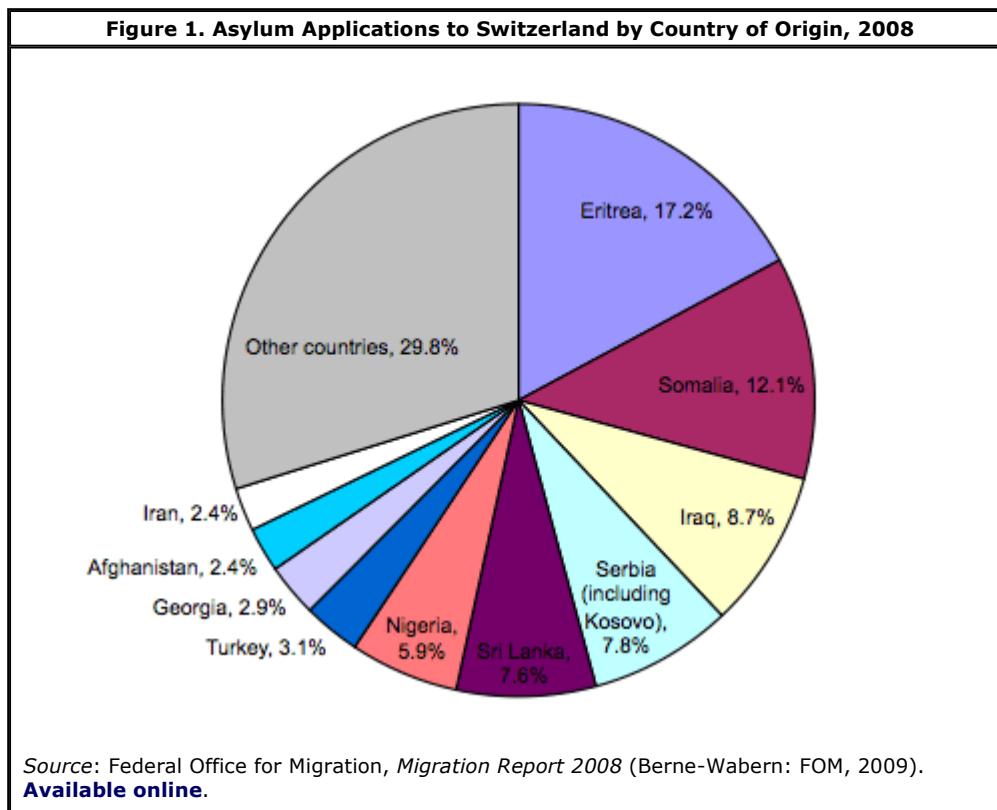
**Table 1. Foreigners in Switzerland by Region and Select Non-EU Countries, 2007**

Nationality	Number of foreigners	Percent of total
Total	1,703,744	100
EU-27/EFTA	1,024,542	60.1
non-EU-27/EFTA	679,232	39.9
Region		
Europe	1,454,077	85.3
Asia	109,113	6.4
Africa	66,599	3.9
Latin America	44,740	2.6
North America	24,270	1.4
Oceania	3,777	0.2
Stateless/Unknown	1,198	0.1
Non-EU countries		
Serbia and Montenegro	196,078	11.5
Turkey	75,382	4.4
Macedonia	60,509	3.6
Bosnia and Herzegovina	41,654	2.4
Croatia	38,114	2.2

*Note:* EU-27 countries include Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxemburg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. In addition to Switzerland, EFTA countries include Iceland, Liechtenstein, and Norway.  
*Source:* Swiss Federal Statistical Office, *La population étrangère en Suisse* (Neuchâtel: FSO, 2008). [Available online.](#)

Switzerland admitted 22,900 refugees in 2007. Almost one-fourth were from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro, with one-fifth from Turkey and 10 percent from Iraq.

There were 40,774 people in the asylum process at the end of 2008. The 16,606 asylum applications submitted in 2008 represent a 53.1 percent increase from 2007. Switzerland defines asylum seekers as those who explicitly ask (in writing or orally) for protection from persecution. The top countries of origin for applicants in 2008 were Eritrea, Somalia, Iraq, Serbia (including Kosovo), and Sri Lanka (see Figure 1).



Of the 11,062 new asylum applications handled in 2008, 20.4 percent were accepted while 40.5 percent were rejected. Another 27.8 percent were denied entry and 11.3 percent were withdrawn or written off. The overall asylum approval rate was 23.0 percent.

### Integration Indicators

In general, non-EU/EFTA foreign residents tend to be less educated, experience lower employment rates and hold lower-skilled jobs, and live in poverty at higher rates than EU/EFTA citizens in Switzerland and Swiss nationals.

Although Switzerland has a relatively low naturalization rate, non-EU/EFTA citizens are more likely to take up Swiss citizenship. They also make up the majority of Switzerland's Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Hindus.

In terms of education, as of 2007, 20.0 percent of foreign adults age 18 to 24 had not received a high school diploma and were not enrolled in higher education, compared to 5.0 percent of Swiss nationals in the same age group, according to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office.

Immigrants from the EU-27 countries experience significantly lower unemployment levels than workers from other countries. Unemployment rates among EU-27 country citizens in Switzerland was 4 percent in 2007 versus 14 percent for non-EU-27 country citizens. Among Swiss citizens, the 2007 unemployment rate was 2.7 percent.

While EU-27 citizens and Swiss citizens have similar levels of highly skilled employment, immigrants from Turkey and the Balkans represent a notable portion of unskilled laborers in Switzerland.

In 2007, 32 percent of workers from Turkey and the Balkans were employed as drivers, assembly line workers, and manual laborers. About 15 percent of both EU-27 citizens and those of non-European nationalities (excluding Turks and people from the Balkans) were engaged in unskilled labor. Only 8.1 percent of Swiss workers were engaged in the unskilled-labor sector in 2007 (see page 43 of this [Swiss Federal Statistical Office PDF](#) for figure).

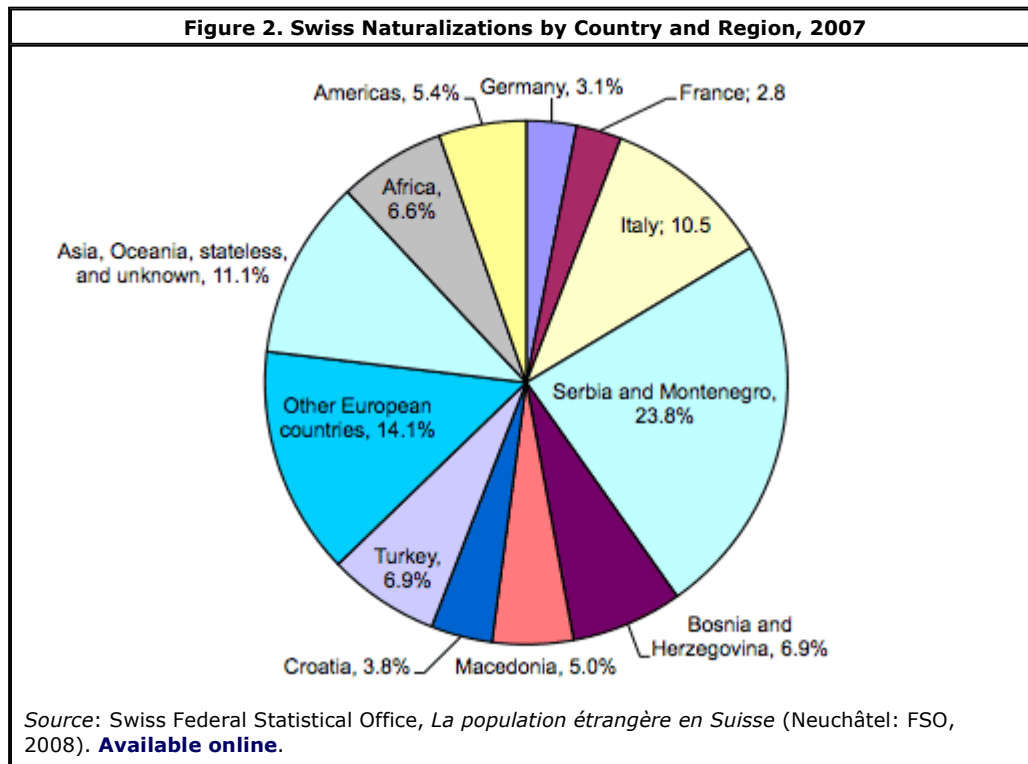
About a quarter of those from Turkey and the Balkans (24.5 percent) between ages 20 and 59 lived in poverty in 2007, as did a similar percentage of other non-European

nationalities (23.4 percent). In contrast, just 9.4 percent of those from the EU-27 and 6.9 percent of Swiss lived in poverty.

Naturalizations are another indicator of immigrant integration. By its own admission, Switzerland has a low naturalization rate, with just 2.9 percent of foreigners naturalizing in 2007 — lower than in 2006 but double the rate in 1997. Those from regions beyond Europe had higher rates: 6.4 percent for those from Africa, 5.6 percent for those from Asia, and 4.9 percent for those from Latin America.

In terms of individual countries, citizens of non-EU/EFTA countries had the highest naturalization rates in 2007: 9.5 percent for those from Albania, 7.3 percent for those from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 5.5 percent for those from Serbia and Montenegro, 5.3 percent for those from Russia, and 5.2 percent for those from Ukraine. It is important to note that many workers from EU/EFTA countries may desire only temporary residence and will never seek Swiss naturalization.

In 2007, 43,900 immigrants from a mix of traditional and newer origin countries became Swiss citizens. The largest share were from Serbia and Montenegro (23.8 percent), followed by Italy (10.5 percent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (6.9 percent), Turkey (6.9 percent), and Macedonia (5.0 percent). Asia and Oceania (11.1 percent) and Africa (6.6 percent) also had notable shares (see Figure 2). The number of naturalizations slightly increased in 2008 to 45,305 people.



Switzerland remains an overwhelmingly Christian country, with 2.4 million Reformed Protestants and over 3 million Roman Catholics in 2000, the most recent year for which official data are available. Together, these two religions accounted for 75 percent of the population.

In 2000, foreigners from non-EU/EFTA countries accounted for the majority of Switzerland's Muslims, Orthodox Christians, and Hindus (see Table 2).

By far the largest of these religions was Islam: about 311,000 residents of Switzerland were Muslim in 2000, or 4.3 percent of the country's total population at the time, according to the Swiss Federal Statistical Office. They were more numerous in the German-speaking parts of the country and more highly concentrated in large cities, particularly Basel and Lausanne, than in rural areas.

**Table 2. Select Religious Groups in Switzerland by Resident Population's Country of Birth or Region (in percent), 2000**

Country of Origin	Evangelical Reform Church	Roman Catholicism	Christian Orthodox	Islam	Hinduism
Switzerland	90.4	76	25.4	24.7	25.4
Germany	3.1	1.8	0.5	0.2	0.2
France	0.5	1.7	0.4	0.2	0.1
Italy	0.2	6.7	0.1	0.1	0.1
Turkey			2	14.0	
Former Yugoslavia	0.1	1.6	51.3	42.8	0.1
North Africa*	0.1	0.1	0.5	4.8	
United States	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.1	0.2
Sri Lanka		0.1		0.1	57.1
India		0.1	0.4	0.1	8.2
Other/not indicated	4.8	7.0	16.9	12.7	8.4
Total (number)	2,408,049	3,047,887	131,851	310,807	27,839

Note: \*North Africa includes Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt.

Source: Swiss Federal Statistical Office, *Religionslandschaft in der Schweiz* (Neuchâtel: FSO, 2004). [Available online](#).

While the Federal Statistic Office has not undertaken a survey of Muslims in Switzerland since 2000, some municipalities have measured their own populations. According to an April 2009 article from the Swiss-French newspaper *24 Heures*, the Muslim population in the city of Montreux rose from 4.6 percent of the population in 2000 to 6.0 percent by 2008.

About 18 percent of all foreign nationals were Muslim in 2000, but nearly all Muslims — 88.3 percent — were foreigners in 2000. Among foreign-national Muslims, 56.4 percent came from the former Yugoslavia and 20.2 percent from Turkey. Foreign nationals made up 78.1 percent of the 131,900 Orthodox Christians (mainly from the former Yugoslavia) and 92.5 percent of the 27,800 Hindus (overwhelmingly from Sri Lanka).

### Integration Policies

In Switzerland, the stated objective of immigrant integration policy is "living together peacefully and offering equal opportunities to all." But like many countries, achieving and defining successful integration remains difficult.

The federal government has taken a leadership role on immigrant integration since the late 1990s but has delegated most of the day-to-day integration and naturalization processes to its cantons and municipalities.

This delegation is typical of the way governance takes place in Switzerland, with its strong federal system that puts most responsibility in the hands of local authorities. In 2008, the federal government allocated 14 million Swiss francs (US\$13 million) for its integration promotion program. The federal government also spends 30 million to 40 million Swiss francs per year (US\$28 million to US\$37 million) in lump-sum payments to cantons for the integration of refugees and individuals with temporary residency permits.

The 1999 Integration Article, part of the Act on Foreign Nationals, was the first major revision of Swiss immigration law since 1931. Several factors contributed to the law's passage, particularly a peak in immigration from the Balkans following conflicts in the former Yugoslavia as well as Switzerland's signing of bilateral accords in June 1999 with the European Union regarding Free Movement of Persons (voters approved the measure in May 2000). The government also sought to improve economic integration with access to the labor market.

The 1999 legislation codified practices that had been informally in place throughout the 1990s. The four main points of the law, defined by the Federal Council, include the following:

- complying with Free Movement of Persons agreements for EU/EFTA citizens, while placing stricter entry requirements on non-EU/EFTA citizens (namely, strict work qualifications)
- reducing barriers to work for legal foreign residents of Switzerland
- fighting abuses including human trafficking, black market labor, and illegal family reunification
- codifying parliament's authority to define laws and policies on foreigners in Switzerland

Unlike other countries where naturalization is a federal responsibility, individual communities or cantons in Switzerland decide whether or not to approve an immigrant's application for naturalization although the federal government gives general guidelines and the standard residency requirement is 12 years. Depending on the canton, the naturalization process can cost several thousand Swiss francs per person although the fee cannot exceed the actual cost.

Communities and cantons approve individual citizenship applicants either by means of a public assembly or a special panel decision. Panels and assemblies composed of municipality representatives may look at data about nationality, duration of residence in Switzerland, and degree of integration, but they are not privy to all private information, including the applicant's religion.

Refusals for naturalization must be given in writing, and applicants can appeal to cantonal authorities in cases of a refusal.

Between 1999 and 2005, the town of Emmen, near Lucerne in German-speaking Switzerland, used a third way for determining naturalizations that has since been banned: residents voted on whether or not to accept naturalization applications from local immigrants.

As a result, immigrants mainly from the Balkans who met basic federal requirements were denied citizenship. Some applicants whose applications were rejected appealed to higher authorities. The cases drew national attention and prompted the federal government to outlaw the ballot box practice in 2007.

Under the 2007 Ordinance on the Integration of Foreigners, part of the Foreign Nationals Act approved in 2006, the Swiss federal government laid out stricter federal guidelines for the integration process of non-EU/EFTA citizens (integration policies do not apply to EU/EFTA citizens as codified by EU standards for the Free Movement of Persons).

The ordinance provides clear measures by which to determine an immigrant's level of integration into Swiss society. The legislation states that if an immigrant is found to not meet those standards, his residency permits will not be renewed or will be revoked.

The most important measures of integration, according to the ordinance, are mastery of a Swiss national language (German, French, Italian, or Romansch) and the speaking of that language in the home. Other measures include understanding of Swiss social life and structures, Swiss laws and the legal system, and matters of respect when living in a community.

The 2007 law also mandates that immigrants show good integration in the labor market and make efforts to improve their skills and qualifications. Under the ordinance, local authorities responsible for implementing integration policies are required to support immigrants in meeting these requirements, for example by providing foreigners with information about language and training courses.

A 2008 pilot program in Zurich and Basel had immigrants sign an "integration contract" that stipulates their participation in an intensive integration program and language course in exchange for an extension or granting of a Swiss residency permit. Eighty immigrants participated in the pilot program; in Zurich, applications for participation exceeded the number of available places.

Cantons are not required to integrate their foreigners on entirely local funds. The 2007 ordinance stipulates that the federal government will pay cantons a quarterly sum of 6,000 Swiss francs (about US\$5,000) per refugee or immigrant with provisional legal residency, which excludes most asylum seekers.

The funds are intended for professional training and language courses. Of the 6,000 Swiss francs, 80 percent is deposited at the beginning of the quarter and the remaining 20 percent is awarded upon review of results of the local authority's integration practices.

In Switzerland, school-aged asylum seekers are allowed to attend Swiss schools whether or not their request for asylum has been approved. Although asylum seekers cannot work in their first three months, thereafter Swiss policy states they are granted a work permit unless labor market conditions preclude doing so; their work permits may be restricted to industries with personnel shortages.

In addition to local governments, nonprofit organizations also provide some language courses and vocational training at no or low cost.

According to Swiss volunteers at one nonprofit school in Geneva, only motivated asylum seekers make use of the free French classes and computer courses. Many migrants, the volunteers say, struggle with loneliness, isolation, and, in some cases, with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder related to violence and difficult conditions in their countries of origin. If the asylum seeker can prove his case, the canton will pay for limited psychiatric care at Geneva hospitals.

### **Tougher Laws for Non-EU/EFTA Citizens**

Amid rising national and international examination of Swiss immigration laws, as in the Emmen case, came a 2007 report from Doudou Diène, UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia, and related intolerance.

Diène called the Swiss naturalization system "racist," in part due to what he characterized as xenophobic and discriminatory legislative campaigns of far-right political parties on immigration and asylum law.

Such harsh assessments of Swiss attitudes have bolstered the arguments of the political left and given increased fervor among those on the far right (explored in more detail in the next section). However, it is important to note that the debate in Switzerland over immigration policies was already quite strong. By no means have Swiss policymakers or civil society ignored the criticism coming from the global audience.

In fact, the debate rose to a head in 2006. After a three-year debate, the Swiss parliament in 2005 passed a stricter version of the 1999 foreigner and asylum law.

A coalition of left political parties, advocates, and churches gathered over 90,000 signatures to push a referendum on the legislation. Despite their efforts, Swiss voters approved the Foreign Nationals Act in September 2006. Switzerland's direct democracy system mandates that once voters pass a referendum, the federal government can do little to change the outcome.

Under the Foreign Nationals Act, which went into effect on January 1, 2008, non-EU/EFTA citizens face stricter entry requirements and, if they are caught committing a crime, harsher punishments. The law states that residency permits will be awarded to non-EU/EFTA citizens only if the immigrant is a specialist, a manager, or a highly qualified professional. EU/EFTA citizens, on the other hand, can legally reside in Switzerland while searching for any type of employment.

The amendment to the asylum act, also passed in 2006, included new measures to reject asylum requests if the applicant cannot furnish a passport or identity card within 48 hours; systematic rejection of asylum seekers coming from neighboring transit countries considered safe; and denial of all social assistance for applicants who have been rejected for asylum.

The United Nations and Amnesty International, in addition to several Swiss political parties, churches, and advocacy groups, harshly criticized the amendment. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees noted that rejecting asylum seekers who cannot produce a form of identification violates the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, which protects refugees who were forced to flee their countries without personal documents.

Those opposed to the law collected 160,000 signatures to force a national vote. However, the amendment received voter approval and went into effect in 2008.

In January 2009, the federal government began reviewing the foreigner and asylum laws, due to concerns about the increasing number of asylum applications. A report from the federal government following the review, which ended in April 2009, states that Switzerland needs to take action to prevent abuses of the asylum system and to expedite and streamline the asylum process.

Proposed changes to the asylum law include refusing asylum for deserters and no longer allowing people to apply for asylum at Swiss embassies abroad. At this time, these modifications are only proposals, and there is no set timeline for a vote on the changes.

### **The Role of the Swiss People's Party**

The far-right Swiss People's Party (SVP) has succeeded in getting the Swiss parliament to pass several laws tightening controls on immigration and foreign residents in Switzerland. For instance, the SVP strongly supported the 2006 Act on Foreign Nationals and the amendment to the asylum act. The party is particularly known for its provocative poster campaigns.

In 2007, during the federal election campaign, the SVP received international attention for its outspoken anti-immigrant rhetoric. The September 2007 headline from the British newspaper, *The Independent*, shocked and embarrassed the country: "Switzerland: Europe's Heart of Darkness?"

Specifically, the SVP campaigned on an initiative that would have expelled immigrants who commit serious crimes. The party's posters depicted three white sheep kicking out a black sheep, against the background of the Swiss flag. The posters — which the SVP later withdrew — proclaimed, "For More Security."

Diène's 2007 UN report even warned that Switzerland was in a dangerous situation of "racism, xenophobia, and discrimination."

The SVP received 29 percent of votes for elected officials in the 2007 election, gaining 62 seats in the National Council (the lower house of parliament). It was the most votes obtained by a single party in Switzerland's multiparty system since 1919.

The party's fortunes have waned since the 2007 election, partly due to internal divisions in party leadership. Christoph Blocher, the SVP's charismatic and tough-talking leader, lost his Federal Council seat when the Swiss public and politicians began to perceive him as too partisan in a country whose politics have long been dominated by consensus and a commitment to compromise and civility.

Parliament members replaced Blocher with Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf, also of the SVP. Widmer-Schlumpf's acceptance of the seat divided the party, and she went on to join a new party that grew out of the split, the Conservative Democrats.

A February 2009 poll showed that if a federal election were held, the SVP would win 22.8 percent of the votes, down more than 6 points from 2007. Widmer-Schlumpf's Conservative Democrats were forecast to win an impressive 4 percent of the vote, less than a year after the party's creation.

In a February 2009 vote, the SVP experienced a significant defeat when nearly 60 percent of Swiss voters approved a referendum to continue the free-movement-of-labor agreements Switzerland has with 25 EU Member States and extend those to Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the European Union in 2007.

The SVP's campaign against the referendum featured posters of a Swiss map being pecked to pieces by black crows. The party had opposed extending the free-labor initiative due to its stated concern that an influx of Bulgarians, Romanians, and ethnic Roma from both countries would arrive in Switzerland, seeking work.

Other major political parties supported the extension, as did the government and several business associations, saying that small Switzerland relies on foreign workers and exchange of ideas and trade with European countries.

The SVP received another blow in March 2009 when, following several hours of debate, the Swiss House of Representatives voted against its proposal to ban minarets. Currently, Switzerland has four mosques with minarets, the oldest of which was built in Zurich in the 1960s.



In general, the Swiss believe that the values of Islam differ from Swiss values. SVP politicians had called minarets a symbol of Islamic law that must be prohibited in Switzerland, saying their presence could lead to a wave of minarets and Islamic domination in Europe. The Swiss government has countered that a ban on minarets would increase Muslims' dislike for Switzerland and could make the country a target for terrorist attacks.

The minaret proposal will go to the people in a national referendum at the earliest in November 2009. An April 2009 poll showed that the referendum would narrowly be defeated, with 14 percent of voters undecided.

### **Popular Attitudes**

The active presence of racism and xenophobia in Switzerland varies significantly by region. In francophone western Switzerland, and particularly in Geneva, home to the United Nations and other international organizations, tolerance for foreigners is high. Geneva's residents tend to vote for leftist political parties that have strongly opposed SVP's anti-immigrant campaigns.

The strongholds of anti-immigrant political parties lie in rural German-speaking Switzerland and in the southern Ticino region, which has its own far-right party called the Lega dei Ticinesi.

In the rural, German-speaking cantons of Uri, Obwalden, Nidwalden, Appenzell Innerrhoden, and Appenzell Ausserrhoden, foreigners accounted for less than 14 percent of the population. The Ticino region has an above-average share of foreigners, 25.9 percent in 2007. In 2000, 26.0 percent of its 78,789 foreigners were from non-EU/EFTA countries.

The strongest support for SVP politicians in the 2007 parliamentary elections did not always come from cantons where foreign nationals make up a smaller share of the population. In the canton of Thurgau, which is largely agricultural (SVP started as a farmer's party), the SVP won 42.4 percent of the votes. Foreigners accounted for an average portion of the cantonal population, at 20.7 percent. In 2000, non-EU/EFTA citizens made up 48.5 percent of the foreign population in Thurgau.

The headscarf as an open expression of Muslim faith has been the topic of continuing debate in Switzerland. Critics believe the headscarf contradicts Swiss democratic values about the equality of women, while others say wearing a headscarf should be a personal freedom.

A 2004 Isopublic poll showed 53 percent of Swiss agreed with the Swiss supermarket chain Migros in its move to expressly allow employees to wear the Muslim headscarf while at work. In the francophone region of Switzerland, respondents were more critical of the Muslim headscarf, while German and Italian speakers were more tolerant.

In the same 2004 survey, 76 percent of Swiss felt that Muslims in Switzerland were not a threat to the country, while 16 percent disagreed.

### **Looking Ahead**

The global recession has hit Switzerland's economy, particularly its finance sector, hard. In 2009, the number of citizens of EU/EFTA countries coming to work in Switzerland — 60 percent of all EU/EFTA immigrants in 2008 — and the number from non-EU/EFTA states may see a downward trend.

In terms of EU/EFTA immigration, Switzerland remains open despite a healthy level of debate. Swiss voters once again approved the free movement of persons with the European Union. Supporters of the accord saw the vote as proof of Swiss pragmatism and understanding that Switzerland's economy depends, to a large extent, on the EU economy.

In the near term, however, Swiss voters may face decisions about the expulsion of foreign criminals and the construction of minarets. These initiatives, some observers say, have less to do with growing the Swiss economy, and the latter has more to do with allowing non-EU/EFTA foreigners to become an integral part of Swiss society.

As Micheline Calmy-Rey, the minister of foreign affairs, said to an international audience in 2008 regarding Swiss proposals to ban minarets, Swiss voters "have always known how to react to the excesses of certain initiatives." Whether voters view tight controls on foreigners' integration into society as "excessive" remains to be seen.

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