

Federal referendum on 14 June 2026

# Switzerland is bursting at the seams

The “Sustainability Initiative” aims to limit migration, but virtually all parties and associations are opposed to it

by Michael Straumann\*



Michael Straumann.  
(Bild zvg)

Switzerland is bursting at the seams. Rents are soaring to record levels, trains are overcrowded, and traffic jams are getting longer. In many places, the country is reaching its capacity limits. For instance, rents in Zurich – both in the city and across the canton – have recently reached an all-time high.<sup>1</sup>

Rents have risen by 21 per cent in the canton over the last 25 years, and by as much as 44 per cent in the city.

Even in public transport – the envy of Europe – bottlenecks are becoming increasingly apparent. Space is running short, particularly on heavily frequented routes such as between Zurich and Bern. According to forecasts, standing room could become the norm on many routes in future. To cope with rising passenger numbers, Swiss Federal Railways (SBB)<sup>2</sup> plans to increase seating capacity by around 20 per cent by 2040 and to increase the frequency of services in many places to half-hourly or quarter-hourly intervals. Around 30 billion Swiss francs are set to be drawn from the state coffers for this purpose.

Traffic jams are a perennial issue and a major nuisance for many Swiss people. According to the *Federal Statistical Office* (FSO), congestion on the national road network increased by 14 per cent in 2024 compared with the previous year – a total of 55,569 hours of congestion were recorded.<sup>3</sup> The main cause is the rising volume of traffic, which has increased by 15 per cent. The economic damage should not be underestimated. Although no current figures are available, calculations by the FSO show that as early as



Unspoilt countryside in eastern Switzerland.  
How much longer will it last? (Picture mt)

2019, time lost – amounting to around 73 million vehicle hours – resulted in costs of approximately three billion francs.

## The free movement of persons – a sacred cow

All these developments point to a central problem that Switzerland has been grappling with for some time: immigration – for some, even the “mother of all problems”. Today, over nine million people live in the country. Although the birth rate, at 1.33 children per woman, is well below the replacement level of 2.1, the population is growing rapidly. Between 2000 and 2024, it has risen from 7.2 million to over 9 million – an increase of around 25 per cent.<sup>4</sup> By European standards, this makes Switzerland one of the frontrunners in terms of population growth<sup>5</sup> – just behind Luxembourg and Ireland.

Before the 2000s, growth was significantly more moderate. Between 1970 and 2000, Switzerland’s population increased by only around one million people. So where does this striking rise from the 2000s come from? The answer lies in the *Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons* (AFMP),<sup>6</sup> which Switzerland concluded with the European Union in 1999. The agreement allows citizens of both sides to move freely within the other’s territory, to live and work

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there. EU citizens can live and work in Switzerland (just as Swiss citizens can in the EU), provided they have, for example, a job or sufficient financial means. The *free movement of persons* has been in force since 2002.

Over the past two decades, most immigrants to Switzerland have come from EU countries. EU citizens account for around two million people – approximately 63 per cent of all immigrants. The free movement of persons has thus proved to be a key driver of immigration and the strong population growth of recent years.

Incidentally, only a small proportion of Switzerland's land area is habitable. Around 32 per cent is covered by forests and woodland, 35 per cent by agricultural land and 25 per cent by unproductive land such as rock, scree, waters or glaciers. Only eight per cent is settlement area.<sup>7</sup>

If the population continues to grow, ultimately there is only one choice: either build more densely – or allow built-up areas to expand at the expense of natural, cultural and agricultural land. The problem is that once land has been built on, it is almost impossible to reclaim it. It is usually permanently sealed, and renaturation is costly and takes decades. Consequently, any expansion of built-up areas must be weighed up with great care.

### **Those profiting from immigration**

Although immigration from the EU continues unabated, it is regarded as a sacred cow by political decision-makers, large corporations and umbrella organisations in this country. One of the justifications put forward for this trend is that the free movement of persons alleviates the shortage of skilled workers in Switzerland. However, economists *Reiner Eichenberger* and *Fabian Kuhn* from the University of Fribourg question this assumption.<sup>8</sup>

After two decades of the free movement of persons, the shortage of skilled workers should have been resolved long ago. Instead, immigration is exacerbating the need: a growing population increases the demand for housing, goods and services. This additional demand must in turn be met by further skilled workers – a self-reinforcing cycle.

It is also worth questioning whether the free movement of persons increases the overall prosperity of the Swiss population. It is rather the politicians in Bern, large corporations and

associations that benefit – not the average citizen. In this context, Eichenberger and Kuhn speak of “filling costs” – the consequences of growth for the general population. For them, costs are rising due to the scarcity of land and infrastructure. Rents are rising, despite ongoing construction.

Most recently, the property consultancy firm *Wüest Partner* highlighted in its *Immo-Monitoring* report<sup>9</sup> the impact of immigration on the Swiss housing market. A one-per-cent increase in population pushes up the cost of detached houses by 0.88 per cent and flat ownership by 1.37 per cent. There is also a clear effect on rents: a one per cent increase in population leads to a rise in asking rents of around one per cent. Immigration thus noticeably increases demand for rental properties and home ownership.

Although the introduction of the free movement of persons and the resulting rise in immigration were accompanied by growth in Switzerland's *gross domestic product* (GDP), this is irrelevant to the quality of life and prosperity of the individual citizen. What is decisive, rather, is the gross domestic product per capita. Since the introduction of the free movement of persons, GDP per capita in Switzerland has grown only marginally.<sup>10</sup> Excluding cross-border commuters, growth between 2007 and 2023 amounts to a mere 0.39 per cent. By way of comparison: in the EU, it stood at 0.64 per cent over the same period.

Ergo: the free movement of persons and sustained net immigration, which stood at around 75,000 people last year,<sup>11</sup> make no significant contribution to local prosperity.

### **The Fall of Swiss Democracy**

In Switzerland, there have already been several attempts to limit immigration. The most prominent is the “Mass Immigration Initiative”.<sup>12</sup> This popular initiative called for immigration to be controlled through annual caps and quotas – aligned with Switzerland's overall economic interests. At the same time, it demanded the amendment of conflicting international treaties, particularly the bilateral agreements with the EU, which provide for the free movement of persons.

The electorate approved the proposal by 50.3 per cent. Parliament then had five years to implement it. However, the measures that could have slowed population growth were largely watered down in the resulting legislation. In-

stead, a solution emerged that was primarily designed not to jeopardise relations with the EU. There was no major protest against the de facto non-implementation of the Mass Immigration Initiative – not even from the Swiss People's Party. In 2020, the SVP did launch the "Limitation Initiative" as a second attempt<sup>13</sup> – but this was rejected by the electorate with 61.7 per cent.

The example of the Mass Immigration Initiative illustrates how the E-ID Act<sup>13</sup> reflects a recurring pattern in Swiss politics: there are certain sacred cows that must not be "slaughtered". These include unchecked mass migration as well as the introduction of a digital identity. The will of the people is tacitly circumvented in the process. If a decision turns out to be "undesirable", its implementation is watered down – or the proposal is resubmitted in a slightly altered form until the result is acceptable. In this way, direct democracy degenerates into folklore – and the alienation between citizens and politics intensifies. David Dürr, professor of law at the University of Zurich, was not wrong when, in one of his books a few years ago, he provocatively described Swiss democracy as a "state opera".<sup>14</sup>

### **The Sustainability Initiative**

On 14 June, Switzerland will once again vote on a popular initiative aimed at curbing mass migration. We are talking about the "No 10-Million Switzerland" initiative. This "sustainability initiative" demands<sup>15</sup> that the permanent resident population – that is, all Swiss citizens with their main residence in Switzerland as well as foreign nationals with a residence permit valid for at least twelve months or a corresponding period of residence – does not exceed the ten-million mark by 2050. To put this into context: at the end of September 2025, 9.1 million people were living in Switzerland. According to a reference scenario by the Federal Statistical Office, the permanent resident population is expected to grow to ten million by 2040 and to 10.5 million by 2055.

The Federal Council and Parliament are to take countermeasures as soon as the population reaches 9.5 million, primarily in the areas of asylum and family reunification. The initiative stipulates that provisionally admitted persons will no longer be granted settlement permits or be naturalised; family reunification would also be restricted.

International treaties that fuel population growth are to be renegotiated regarding exemption or safeguard clauses. If these steps prove insufficient, the Sustainability Initiative envisages the termination of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons with the EU as a last resort.

### **What the opponents of the initiative say**

The SVP, which launched the initiative and is its main driving force, stands largely alone politically. The "Sustainability Initiative" faces opposition from a broad alliance – comprising parties such as the FDP, the Centre Party, the Social Democrats, the Green Liberals and the Evangelical People's Party, as well as business associations and trade unions.

The centre-right "No" camp describes the proposal as a "harmful chaos initiative",<sup>16</sup> which endangers jobs and pensions in Switzerland. Without targeted immigration, there is also a risk of a collapse in service provision – particularly in care, skilled trades and other labour-intensive sectors. Construction, tourism and agriculture are heavily reliant on foreign workers.

Furthermore, the camp warns of the consequences of terminating the free movement of persons: this would trigger the "guillotine" clause.<sup>17</sup> The clause is part of "Bilateral Agreements I", the first package of treaties between Switzerland and the EU (1999), in which agreements on transport, trade and the free movement of persons were negotiated. It states: if Switzerland terminates one of these agreements, all other treaties automatically lapse as well.

Warnings of significant risks for workers and the labour market are also coming from the left-wing camp. There are fears of an erosion of workers' rights, falling wages and a further exacerbation of the shortage of skilled workers. In these circles, the sustainability initiative is seen as an attack on social harmony in Switzerland. The Federal Council also recommends a "No" vote. It takes a similar line to the centre-right "No" camp and warns, ostensibly, against terminating the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons, which would strain relations with the EU and create additional uncertainty.

### **What the initiative's supporters say**

In response to the accusation that the sustainability initiative would cause chaos, the initiators

counter that chaos already reigns today<sup>18</sup> – specifically as a result of excessive and uncontrolled immigration. This is evident in skyrocketing rents, congested roads, overcrowded trains, rising health insurance premiums and increasing crime. They counter warnings of a collapse in public services and a worsening shortage of skilled workers by arguing that unchecked migration does not solve the problem but exacerbates it. Immigration attracts further immigration<sup>19</sup> and thus increases the pressure on infrastructure and the labour market.

The initiators also reject criticism from the left. It is not the sustainability initiative, but ongoing migration that is driving down wages. Foreign workers often perform the same work for lower wages, thereby increasing the pressure on local workers. Furthermore, the claim that most of the immigration consists of labour migration is misleading: In fact, their share amounts to no more than around 54 per cent, whilst a significant proportion occurs via family reunification and asylum.

In response to the warning from the Federal Council and the centre-right “No” camp regarding the termination of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons, the initiators point to the phased mechanism of the proposal. This does not require immediate termination of the agreement but first obliges the Federal Council to take effective domestic measures once the population reaches 9.5 million – particularly in the areas of asylum and family reunification. If politicians succeed in limiting immigration in this way, terminating the agreements with the EU will become unnecessary.

### **The referendum campaign will not be a foregone conclusion**

Current polls suggest a neck-and-neck race. According to a survey commissioned by the media group *Tamedia* and the newspaper *20 Minuten*, 45 per cent of respondents are in favour of the proposal, 47 per cent against, and 8 per cent remain undecided.<sup>20</sup> Particularly striking is the divided support base of the FDP: 42 per cent back the initiative. A poll by the research institute *Sotomo* paints a similar picture – with 48 per cent in favour and 45 per cent against.<sup>21</sup> The fact that the figures are so evenly balanced, despite virtually all major parties and associations rejecting the initiative, speaks volumes. It shows that there is a palpable sense of unrest among the

Swiss population – and that “business as usual” on the migration issue is no longer an option for many.

At the same time, a look at recent referendums calls for caution: the SVP camp suffered a fiasco with its campaign on the SBC (Swiss Broadcasting Corporation) initiative. As recently as October, the polls suggested the initiative would be accepted – yet in March, 62 per cent of voters rejected the proposal to halve broadcasting licence fees.<sup>22</sup> The campaign for the sustainability initiative is therefore unlikely to be a foregone conclusion. And even if the vote is a “yes”, it remains to be seen how consistently the Federal Council and Parliament would implement the proposal, as was already evident with the mass immigration initiative. One thing is certain: the clearer the result of the June vote, the more difficult it will be for the federal government in Bern to circumvent the will of the people.

Source: <https://www.straumedien.ch/p/das-boot-ist-voll>, 13 April 2026

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

(This article also appeared as a column on the website of the “Free Academy for Media & Journalism”, edited by media studies academic Prof. Michael Meyen and qualified journalist Antje Meyen.)

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.blick.ch/wirtschaft/75000-zusaetzliche-arbeitskraefte-pro-jahr-so-stark-laesst-die-zuwanderung>

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