

Is Switzerland in Europe?

# Upcoming referendums will show how the Swiss may relate to the EU

A proposal to end freedom of movement with the EU will probably fail

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ZURICH

**O**PERATION LIBERO is planning something, but it won't say what. The Swiss liberal activist group is known for its creative campaigns against referendums launched by the right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP). On September 27th the latest such initiative, to end freedom of movement with the EU, comes to a vote, and Operation Libero plans to stage an unspecified media stunt. The aim is to tease the country's politicians, not for doing too much to integrate into the EU, but for doing too little. "They think Swiss people don't want [more integration] with the EU, but that's not true," says Laura Zimmermann, the group's co-head. "Times have changed."





If so, Operation Libero deserves some credit. For decades the tone of Swiss politics has been set by the anti-immigrant SVP, the country's biggest party. In 2014 an SVP initiative to renegotiate the treaty that lets EU citizens live and work freely in Switzerland (and vice versa) unexpectedly won 50.3% of the vote. That prompted a circle of young liberals headed by Flavia Kleiner, then 24, to launch Operation Libero. Their volunteers ran outreach campaigns under a bright-pink logo. Rather than argue on the populists' terms, the group recast the debate. When the SVP proposed expelling foreigners who commit even minor crimes, Operation Libero framed it as an assault on Switzerland's precious rule of law.

Since then, all of the SVP's big initiatives have lost. Polls show the current one will probably fail too, with about 60% of Swiss opposed. Many voters have learned from the 2014 initiative: the EU refused to negotiate and the Swiss gave in. The SVP's new, tougher proposal would force the government to scrap the treaty if it has not reached a new one within a year. But seven crucial treaties with the EU are covered by a "guillotine clause" that suspends all of them if only one is abrogated. Few Swiss imagine they have much leverage in Brussels.

The next fight will come after the vote. The EU wants the Swiss to sign an “institutional framework agreement” that requires them automatically to adopt shifts in EU rules unless they specifically object. (Currently there is no obligation, but they generally follow anyway for fear of losing market access.) The two sides reached an agreement last year, but the Swiss have held off putting it to parliament until after the referendum. Thomas Aeschi, the SVP’s parliamentary leader, warns that under the framework agreement EU rules could restrict the cherished autonomy of the Swiss cantons and stop them granting tax breaks.

“I think that would be a good thing,” laughs Balthasar Glättli, the head of the Swiss Green Party. But the Greens worry that the framework agreement might undercut minimum-wage guarantees. The justice minister, Karin Keller-Sutter of the centre-right Liberals, backs the deal, as do drug firms and banks. But there is no majority for it in the seven-member Federal Council that rules the country.

Swiss attitudes are mixed. Sotomo, a pollster, finds that most of them want a framework agreement with the EU rather than the current patchwork of treaties, but other polls show less support. Still, the SVP has lost momentum; the Green and Liberal Green parties were the big winners in elections last year. Ms Kleiner, who recently stepped down from Operation Libero ("I turned 30," she explains), thinks this a good moment to try out new political narratives. Switzerland is a conservative country, but it may also be ready for a change. ■

***Correction (September 25th 2020):*** In elections last year the party that gained seats along with the Greens was the Liberal Greens.

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