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Vague unease with incalculable consequences

YOU WILL RETURN TO A COUNTRY that is no longer the same as the one you left. A friend wrote this message to me on 9 February. It reached me in Sydney where I was visiting the part of my family currently living in Australia. Is it really true? Has Switzerland become a different country after voting yes to the “initiative against mass immigration”?

No, that is obviously not the case. The Swiss have not turned into a nation where the majority are xenophobic, patriotic fundamentalists as is sometimes portrayed. The reason for the approval of the Swiss People’s Party (SVP) initiative was a vague sense of unease for many people about high rents, crowded trains, congested roads and wage pressure. The referendum was somewhat paradoxical if you consider where the initiative gained most support. The highest numbers of Yes votes were found in remote, rural regions where few foreigners live.



The outcome of the ballot has fundamentally changed Switzerland’s relationship with the 28 EU states. During the referendum campaign this ramification was constantly played down by those behind the proposal but it is now a reality. The Federal Council now finds itself in the unenviable position of having to seek ways of protecting Switzerland from isolation in the face of the decision reached on immigration policy. It has now shifted into the role of suitor in its dealings with the European Union, Switzerland’s most important trade partner. The first consequences of the isolationist policy were announced by Brussels just under a week after the referendum: both “Erasmus+”, the agreement on the mobility of students, and the “Horizon 2020” research programme were suspended. This is a bad sign for Switzerland as a research location, for the younger generation and for our small, resource-poor economy. Extensive coverage and comment concerning the referendum can be found in the politics section from page 12.

This issue’s key focus topic is family policy, a subject that all the political parties are devoting much attention to at the moment – often by propagating myths rather than reflecting reality.

I also wish to highlight two other articles in particular – the story of Bernhard Russi, the Swiss skiing legend from the 1970s who played a major role as a course designer at the Olympic Games in Sochi, and a culture feature on Ernst Beyeler and his legacy, the Beyeler Foundation in Basel, which is more successful than any other art museum in Switzerland.

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Cover photo: Symbolic image of Swiss-EU relations: a flag thrower on the Männlichen near Grindelwald with the flag of Europe.
Photo: Keystone/Martin Ruetschi

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