

Swiss plan to cap population gains ground ahead of referendum

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The so-called 10mn initiative, led by the rightwing Swiss People's Party, is backed by 52 per cent of voters, according to a survey published this week by polling institute LeeWas. The trend comes despite strong opposition from business groups and the federal government, ahead of the June 14 vote on the proposal.



Business and industry groups have warned that any curbs on immigration will limit access to skilled labour and undermine growth.

Economiesuisse, the main business lobby, has labelled it a “chaos initiative” and has cautioned it risks damaging Switzerland’s competitiveness and destabilising ties with the EU, its largest trading partner.

The proposal echoes rising antiimmigrant sentiment across Europe that has reshaped political agendas and boosted support for nationalist parties. The issue has become a defining political faultline, influencing both elections and referendum campaigns.

“The results of the poll this week are a big call to action — people realise it is going to be a heated campaign and there is no certainty of the outcome,” said Frédéric Rochat, managing partner at Geneva-based private bank Lombard Odier.

“The trigger point is initially positive — Switzerland has gained attractiveness in a more uncertain world and net migration has increased significantly. But Swiss people are now feeling similar emotions to those seen in Britain before Brexit — a desire to take back control,” he said.

The campaign is expected to be closely fought, with both sides of the political spectrum intensifying efforts to sway undecided voters.

Much of the unease is directed at migration from the EU, which has risen steadily since Switzerland joined the border-free Schengen area in 2008. It is seen by some as contributing to rising rents and straining public services in cities such as Zurich and Geneva.

A “yes” vote would put Bern on a collision course with Brussels, as any curbs to free movement would be in breach of Switzerland’s obligations as part of its accords with the EU and as a member of the Schengen area.

Critics also point out that the initiative leaves key questions over implementation unanswered, with no clear roadmap for how a population cap will be enforced in practice.

Switzerland's population has risen to more than 9mn, with official data showing foreign nationals accounted for almost 30 per cent last year. Large Swiss multinationals such as consumer group Nestlé, pharmaceutical companies Novartis and Roche, as well as private markets group Partners Group, rely heavily on foreign talent.

Beyond the proposed population cap, a more complex debate is unfolding over Switzerland's long-term immigration model. The country operates a dual system: relatively open access for EU citizens under bilateral free movement agreements alongside strict quotas for workers from outside the bloc, who are typically admitted only if they possess highly sought-after skills.

Some policymakers and business leaders favour a shift towards a more selective "Singapore-style" model, where immigration is tightly managed based on economic needs. But such a move would be incompatible with Switzerland's accords with the EU.

Denis Machuel, chief executive of Adecco, the world's largest staffing company, said Switzerland's population growth had "outpaced most European neighbours", fuelling calls for "appropriate control measures". But he warned that restricting access to skilled foreign workers or abandoning free movement with the EU would not benefit the country "economically or societally".