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Vote on “No to a 10-million Switzerland!”

Why this initiative effectively leads to a termination of the Free Movement of Persons and why structural problems are likely to persist even if voters say “yes.”

“The social tensions surrounding population growth are real. The core lever of the initiative is the free movement of persons. However, it is doubtful whether a potential termination of this agreement would sustainably resolve Switzerland's structural issues.”

***Dr. iur. Aurelia Frick,** Deputy CEO & Chief Business Development Officer*

How populous should Switzerland become?

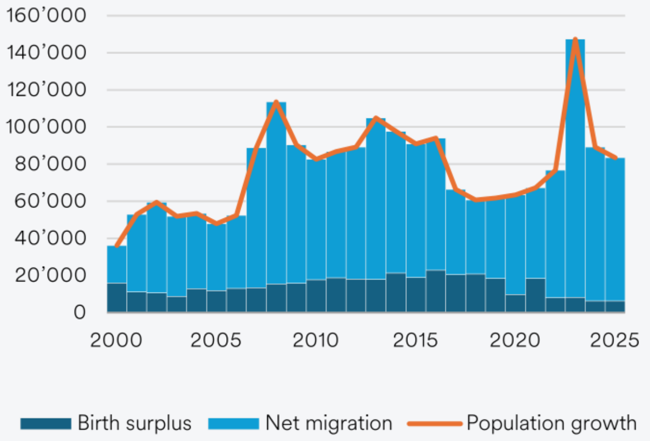
On 14 June 2026, Swiss voters will decide on the so-called Sustainability Initiative, also known as the “No to a 10-million Switzerland!” initiative. The proposal stipulates that the permanent resident population of Switzerland must not exceed 10 million people by 2050 and, in the event of continued high population growth, ultimately calls for the termination of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons with the European Union.

Since the introduction of the Free Movement of Persons in 2002, Switzerland’s permanent resident population has increased from just under 7.3 million to approximately 9.1 million people. Around 80% of this growth is attributable to net immigration, corresponding to an average annual net migration of about 65,000 people. While many European countries are likely to face stagnating or even declining populations in the future, continued growth is expected for Switzerland.

As this development unfolds, social tensions are also increasing. An ever-growing share of the population associates population growth with rising rents, housing shortages, and overburdened infrastructure. Recent surveys indicate that there is a real chance of the initiative being accepted. In the following paragraphs, we outline why the termination of the Free Movement of Persons would effectively become the central lever if the initiative is strictly implemented, and why this would not only leave existing problems unresolved but could also create new areas of tension.

Immigration as a growth driver

Annual change in number of permanent residents



Source: Federal Statistical Office, smzh ag.

Initiative

The initiative stipulates that Switzerland’s permanent resident population must not exceed an upper limit of 10 million people by 2050. After this point, the Federal Council can adjust this threshold annually based on the natural increase in population.

The proposal also includes binding measures before this limit is reached. If the resident population exceeds 9.5 million, the Federal Council and Parliament are required to take steps to curb further population growth. These measures primarily relate to the areas of asylum and family reunification. Additionally, international agreements that impact population growth must be reviewed and, if necessary, renegotiated. Should these measures fail to keep the population within the target for two consecutive years, the initiative ultimately calls for the termination of the FMP agreement with the EU as a last resort.

Context

The initiative is part of a series of political efforts aimed at managing immigration. In 2014, the “Against Mass Immigration” initiative was narrowly accepted. However, its implementation was softened, as direct quotas would have been largely incompatible with the FMP agreement. Instead, a “Swiss-first” hiring rule was introduced to avoid jeopardizing the bilateral agreements.

The 2020 Limitation Initiative went a step further, explicitly demanding the termination of the Free Movement of Persons agreement. This proposal, however, was clearly rejected by voters.

The current proposal differs in its structure from prior initiatives. Rather than addressing immigration directly, it sets an upper limit for the total population. Control is exercised indirectly through individual immigration channels. Although formally not the primary objective, the termination of the Free Movement of Persons Agreement (FMP) could, if implemented strictly, effectively become the main lever.

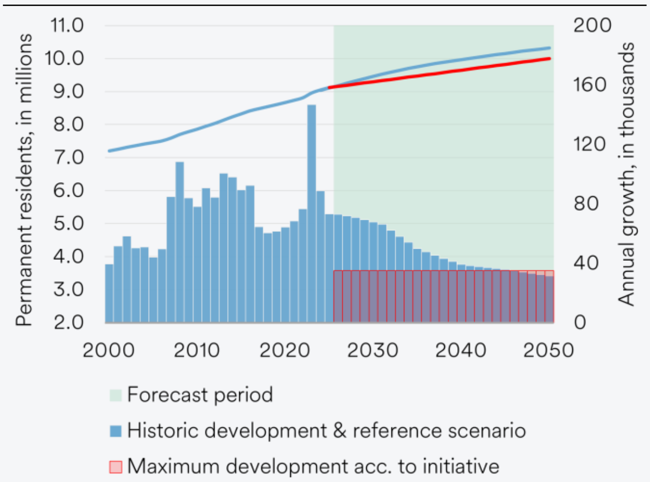
Why termination of the free movement of persons could become the practical consequence

To ensure that the permanent resident population stays below 10 million by 2050, future population growth would need to be limited to an average of just about 35,000 people per year. The reference scenario from the Federal Statistical Office, however, projects a significantly higher average growth rate of around 50,000 people per year. In this scenario, Switzerland would reach the 10 million mark as early as the end of 2041. The threshold of 9.5 million people could be surpassed within the next five years.

This would require a rapid and substantial reduction in population growth. Therefore, the crucial question is: in which areas is there any room for political action? The initiative specifically mentions asylum and family reunification. However, both areas have only limited potential to reduce population growth to the required extent.

Strong reduction of growth needed

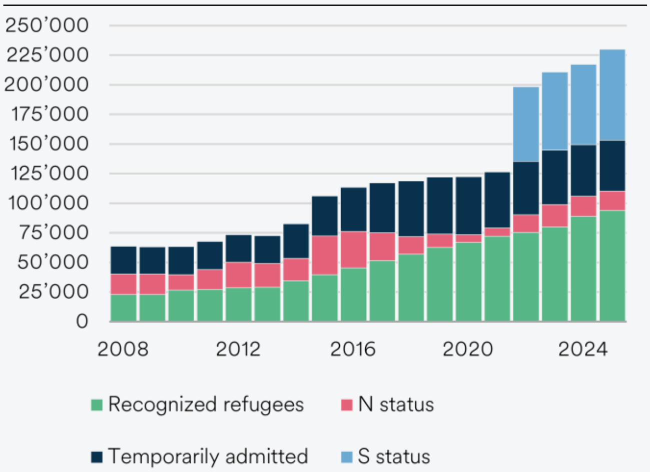
Scenario of FSO vs. maximum growth according to initiative



Source: Federal Statistical Office FSO, smzh ag.

Modest growth in number of recognized refugees

Number of persons in asylum by status



Source: State Secretariat for Migration SEM, smzh ag.

Virtually no room for maneuver in the area of asylum

The number of people in the asylum system has increased significantly over the past five years. At the end of 2025, a total of just over 225,000 individuals were either in the asylum process or already held an asylum-related residence status in Switzerland. Since the pandemic, this represents an increase of around 100,000 people. However, the majority of this rise is not due to a greater number of recognized refugees (permit B), but rather to the introduction of protection status S in connection with the war in Ukraine.

The number of recognized refugees has increased by around 27,000 people since the pandemic; in recent years, they accounted for only about 3% of annual immigration. The asylum approval rate most recently stood at 27%. Even with a more restrictive asylum policy, the impact on overall population growth would therefore remain limited. The majority of the additional population falls under individuals with status S, as well as provisionally admitted persons with status F, who are also classified as permanent residents for statistical purposes after more than twelve months of residence.

Status S is fundamentally oriented toward a return. Status F applies when deportation has been ordered but execution is illegal, unreasonable, or impossible. In both cases, return depends either on the situation in the country of origin or on individual barriers to enforcement. The longer the duration of stay, the more challenging repatriation becomes. Children attend school, individuals enter the labor market, family ties become stronger, and the right to private and family life gains importance in proportionality reviews. While this does not create an automatic right to permanent residence, the legal and practical obstacles to repatriation tend to increase over time.

Therefore, the area of asylum offers only a very limited and controllable lever for restricting population growth.

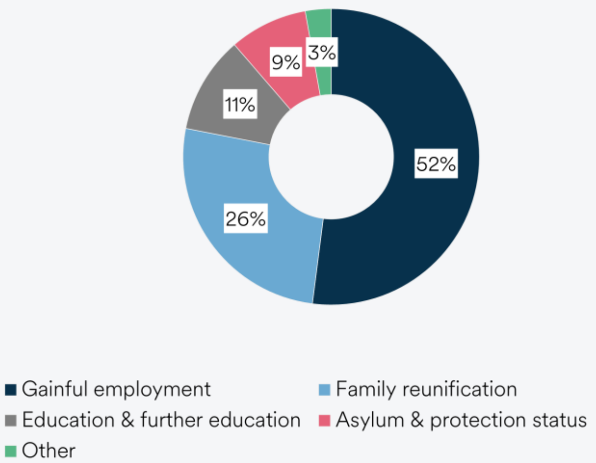
Little leeway in family reunifications

In the past five years, more than 50% of immigration into the permanent foreign resident population was due to employment, while around 26% was attributable to family reunification. On average, approximately 43,000 people immigrated to Switzerland each year through the family reunification process. About half of these individuals came from EU/EFTA countries, while the other half originated from third countries.

Family reunification for EU/EFTA nationals is only marginally subject to political control, as it is directly derived from the Free Movement of Persons Agreement between Switzerland and the European Union. Family members of individuals with the right of residence generally have a legal entitlement to join them. Placing numerical limits or introducing traditional quotas would conflict with the Free Movement of Persons Agreement. Indirect restrictions – such as stricter requirements for housing, financial resources, or the verification of existing residence rights – are conceivable, but would likely have only a limited quantitative effect and could provoke political tensions with the European Union.

Gainful employment as primary immigration driver

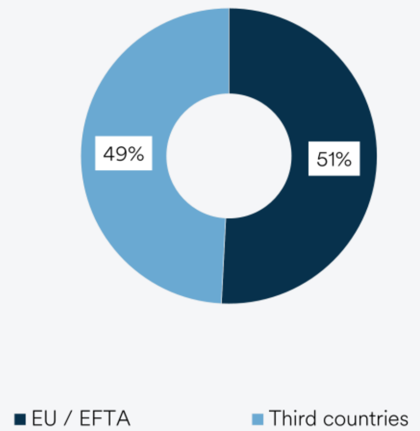
Immigration split by reason of stay (2020 – 2025)



Source: State Secretariat for Migration SEM, smzh ag.

EU/EFTA states account for half of all family reunifications

Split of family reunifications by region of origin (2020–2025)



Source: State Secretariat for Migration SEM, smzh ag.

There is generally more regulatory leeway when it comes to family reunification from third countries, as this is primarily governed by the Swiss Foreign Nationals and Integration Act. Contrary to family reunification from EU/EFTA states, stricter requirements apply regarding income, housing, integration, and language skills. At the same time, the protection of family life and the principle of proportionality set limits on the scope of political action. As a result, traditional quotas are practically excluded in this context as well. While stricter requirements are possible, their overall impact on population growth is likely to remain limited.

Even under optimistic assumptions, reducing immigration through asylum and family reunification is unlikely to be sufficient to curb population growth enough to stay below the 10-million mark. The most significant driver of immigration in quantitative terms remains labor-related migration. This is closely linked to the Free Movement of Persons between Switzerland and the European Union. To reduce population growth to the level implied by the initiative, terminating the Free Movement Agreement would not appear merely as a political last resort – it would, in practice, become the initiative’s central operative mechanism.

What if Swiss voters say “yes”?

Acceptance of the initiative would primarily be seen as a strong political signal. It would confirm that an increasing portion of the population associates population growth with housing shortages, rising rents, and greater strain on infrastructure.

At the same time, it remains uncertain how rigorously the initiative would ultimately be implemented in the event of approval. As seen with the 2014 mass immigration initiative, referendums on migration can later be implemented in a weakened form due to economic interests as well as institutional and European-political realities.

An actual termination of the Free Movement of Persons Agreement would have far-reaching effects beyond immigration. Due to the so-called "guillotine clause," such a termination would automatically render all Bilateral Agreements void. At the same time, ongoing negotiations with the European Union could be strained, and cooperation within the Schengen and Dublin frameworks could come under political pressure. The latter would also have implications for the area of asylum, as the return of asylum seekers to responsible EU states could become more difficult.

Yet, the underlying structural tensions would likely persist. Housing shortages, rising rents, and infrastructure strain are not solely attributable to population growth, but also to lengthy approval processes, regulatory hurdles, limited construction capacity, and the spatial concentration of living and working. At the same time, significantly reduced immigration could create new conflicts in the labor market and exacerbate shortages of skilled labor in specific industries.

The societal and emotional significance of these issues is real. However, whether artificially limiting population growth would truly provide a sustainable solution to the underlying problems remains questionable.

Conclusion

- **In quantitative terms, the key lever lies primarily with labor-related immigration within the framework of the Free Movement of Persons Agreement.**
- **The initiative is a response to real societal tensions surrounding the housing market, infrastructure, and population growth.**
- **At the same time, many of the underlying structural problems do not appear to be solvable solely by limiting population growth.**
- **Even if the initiative is accepted, the specific political implementation will therefore remain crucial.**

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