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Swiss Voters Narrowly Approve Curbs on Immigration

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BERLIN — A narrow majority of voters in Switzerland approved proposals on Sunday that would reintroduce restrictions on the number of foreigners who are allowed to live and work in the country, a move that could have far-reaching implications for Switzerland's relations with the European Union.

The referendum on the changes to the country's liberal immigration law was a rebuke to the Swiss government, the banking industry and business leaders who had lobbied against the restrictions, warning that such a move could endanger Switzerland's prosperity.

The admonitions failed to drown out the warnings of the rightist Swiss People's Party, which introduced the referendum that it said was necessary if Switzerland was to retain its identity in the face of immigration.

Switzerland, which is not part of the European Union, has one of the highest proportions of foreigners in Europe, accounting for about 27 percent of the country's population of about eight million. Many job seekers have arrived from countries hit hard by the European economic crisis.

Immigration has become a polarizing issue across Europe. More prosperous nations are growing worried that their welfare systems cannot handle an influx of workers from the economically weaker Eastern European countries.

Far-right parties with anti-immigrant platforms in France, the Netherlands and Norway have gained strength in recent years, and there have been sharp debates in Britain and Germany over limiting the number of immigrants from Bulgaria and Romania because citizens from those countries gained full access to European Union job markets this year.

The Swiss initiative foresees annual quotas on the number of immigrants allowed to work in the country, as well as limits for specific sectors. It would also require that preference be given to Swiss applicants for open positions.

The proposal passed with the support of 50.3 percent of those who voted; 56 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. The largest cities, Zurich and Basel, rejected the vote, and smaller cities and rural areas supported it.

In Brussels, the European Commission issued a statement saying that it was “disappointed” that the initiative had passed, adding that it would have to study the vote’s implications on relations between the European Union and Switzerland.

The outcome on Sunday seemed to show the differences between the government and industry on the one hand and voters, who approved the introduction of curbs on excessive salaries for business executives two years ago. “We always thought the argument about jobs would win people over,” Urs Schwaller, a lawmaker with the centrist Christian People’s Party, said in an interview with the Swiss television channel SRF. “Clearly, that wasn’t enough.”

The Swiss People’s Party has been particularly skillful at using such popular votes to push for immigration controls in recent years. After growing pressure, the government reintroduced quotas in 2012 limiting the number of work permits that could be issued for European Union citizens.

But Swiss voters have long been reluctant to fully embrace a united Europe. In 1992, the Swiss narrowly rejected membership in the European Economic Area, which was seen as a prelude to full European Union participation. After that, the Swiss government began to negotiate a series of bilateral accords with Brussels that would ease the flow of citizens across the borders.

The Swiss agreed in 2008 to participate in the Pan-European accord known as the Schengen Agreement, which led to the dismantling of patrols at its borders and the free movement of its citizens to European Union nations.

That has made it easy for residents of those countries hit hardest by the euro crisis to move to Switzerland to seek better and higher-paid work. The number of foreign-born residents has risen by 14 percent over the past five years, a pace that some Swiss see as too rapid.

The vote on Sunday also comes at a time when Switzerland is under intense pressure from France, Italy and other European countries that want its banking system to become more transparent. Last year, Switzerland and the United States reached a deal to punish Swiss banks that had helped Americans evade taxes.

“It is far more than a political slap in the face,” the conservative newspaper Neue Zürcher Zeitung wrote in an editorial published on its website after the result was announced. “The Yes to the ‘Massive Immigration Initiative’ is a censure that is comparable to No to the European Economic Area.

“What the verdict means for relations between Switzerland and the E.U. is completely open, but it certainly won’t be good for the economic vitality and prosperity in this country.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/10/world/europe/swiss-voters-narrowly-approve-curbs-on-immigration.html>