

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

Swiss billionaire who manned the battlements against the EU

COLIN FREEMAN
in Bernese Oberland

AS THE owner of a spectacular cliff-top castle, the billionaire Christoph Blocher knows all about how previous generations of Swiss deterred unwanted visitors.

Yet six centuries on from the building of Schloss Rhäzüns, the towering mediæval home where he lives in eastern Switzerland, his tactics for fending off foreign invaders have evolved.

Fed up with an “unacceptable” level of migration from the rest of Europe, Mr Blocher personally bankrolled last week’s referendum campaign in which the Swiss voted to end their freedom of labour arrangements with the European Union.

Put forward by the hard-Right Swiss People’s Party (SVP), for which he is chief treasurer and ideologue, the vote has ushered in tough new quotas on foreign workers.

In the process, it has sent shock waves across Europe, with Mr Blocher hailed as a hero by British Eurosceptics and as a xenophobe by the EU’s high command.

Indeed, judging by the anger in Brussels, where freedom of movement is seen as a core EU principle, the best place for him might be the dungeon in the east wing of his castle.

“The single market is not a Swiss cheese,” said Viviane Reding, the European Commission’s vice-president, who recently accused British politicians of pandering to extremists over opposition to Romanian and Bulgarian migrants. “You cannot have a single market with holes in it.”

Such scorn is a source of pride for Mr Blocher, 73, who describes himself as an admirer of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher and who believes that David Cameron might learn from Switzerland’s experience.

Just as Britain has struggled with its recent wave of immigration from Eastern Europe, he says, Switzerland ended up attracting far more foreign workers than it bargained for when it signed an EU free movement treaty in 1999.

“Our government said we wouldn’t get more than 8,000 people coming in and instead there was 84,000,” Mr Blocher told *The Sunday Telegraph*. “I believe you have had the same problem in the UK, in terms of



Christoph Blocher, ideologue of the hard-Right Swiss People’s Party (SVP) who owns Schloss Rhäzüns, above, bankrolled a referendum last week in which his countrymen voted to end their freedom of labour arrangements with the EU



FABRICE COFFRINI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; MARCO HARTMANN

inaccurate predictions. We had lost our independence and control on immigration, and we needed to get it back.

“The political class in every country in Europe may say it’s all fine, that it’s good for the economy, and they are right in the sense that the whole pie is bigger. But the slice that each person gets is smaller.”

Switzerland, which has never been part of the EU, is braced for retaliatory measures from Mrs Reding and her commission colleagues, who have warned that countries cannot “cherry-pick” their relationships with the bloc.

Since that is precisely what many in Britain would dearly like to do, the battle will be watched eagerly by Eurosceptics in the UK and anti-EU parties across the continent, many of which hope that anger over the handling of the euro-zone crash will generate big gains for them in May’s European elections.

“This is wonderful news for national sovereignty and freedom lovers throughout Europe,” said Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK Inde-

pendence Party. “A wise and strong Switzerland has stood up to the bullying and threats of the unelected bureaucrats of Brussels.”

That same vision of Switzerland as a small, plucky nation is one that Mr Blocher has deftly peddled in his political career, during which he has turned the SVP from an obscure conservative farmers’ movement into the country’s biggest political force. In the 2011 elections, it won 26 per cent of the vote, giving it seats in Switzerland’s seven-member, power-sharing cabinet.

But by appealing to Swiss pride in resisting outside influence, the SVP has also faced accusations of small-mindedness and racism.

Campaign material in 2011 featured the SVP’s mascot, a white goat called Zottel, butting black sheep out of the country. And in 2009, the party was behind a controversial referendum on banning the building of mosque minarets, which was approved by a 57 per cent majority.

Last week’s vote on immigration, meanwhile, was bit-

terly opposed by many business leaders and the Swiss political establishment, who warned it would cause labour shortages and damage the country’s reputation.

Valentin Vogt, the president of the Swiss Employers’ Association, said the vote would send a discouraging signal to business. “What is the point of investing in Switzerland when it is not certain you can get qualified staff to carry out your plans?” he asked.

However, in Switzerland’s decentralised system of government, where most decisions are taken by referendum, populist initiatives cannot be ignored by the political elite. And in the vote itself, the SVP benefited from a well-financed campaign, 50 per cent of the costs being paid from Mr Blocher’s pocket, which produced the tightest of majorities at 50.3 per cent.

Such direct “people power” is viewed with envy by Eurosceptics in Britain, where Mr Cameron complained last year of being powerless under EU law to stop Bulgarian and Romanian jobseekers.

So who is Mr Blocher? Is he, as his supporters claim, a modern-day version of William Tell, the Swiss anti-Habsburg freedom fighter? Or is he, as his critics say, a wealthy meddler, inventing an immigration crisis that does not exist?

Certainly, to the orthodox-minded Brussels bureaucrat, he is probably the closest any European politician comes to resembling a James Bond-style master villain.

As well as his castle domain, which is owned by the family plastics empire, he has a personal fortune estimated at £2 billion and his own private television channel, on which he holds forth at length. In

person, though, Mr Blocher is at pains to portray himself as an ordinary Swiss businessman, for whom politics is a national duty just as military service is.

When *The Sunday Telegraph* met him last week, it was not at his castle but at a mid-priced spa hotel in the peaks of the Bernese Oberland region, where he was holidaying with his wife, Silvia. Together they looked like just another well-heeled Swiss couple, although in the hotel lift, a German guest in a sauna

is unlikely that any mainstream political party in Britain would use such adverts, and in any event, Swiss cities still have little ethnic minority presence compared with the likes of London or Paris.

Of the country’s eight million population, there are roughly 180,000 Asians and Turks, 180,000 from the Balkans, and 70,000 Africans.

True, roughly one in five people are from elsewhere in Europe, and in a historically isolated country, even wealthy British bankers or German IT

professionals can be seen as outsiders. But if Swiss immigration concerns are less urgent than those of other European countries, Mr Blocher wants it to stay that way.

“We have no ghettos and none of the extreme Right parties that exist elsewhere in Europe,” he said. “Why is that? Two reasons. We have avoided having immigrants in concentrations like in Paris, when the Africans, for example, are all in the same place in a way that makes things dangerous. And we also have

European internal market and on the other hand, dilute free circulation,” he warned.

For Mr Blocher, though, the EU needs the Swiss as much as the Swiss need it. Switzerland, he points out, is the bloc’s third biggest trading partner, and the road tunnels through the Swiss Alps are the conduit for much of Europe’s north-south trade. A trade war, he hints, will benefit nobody.

Others believe Brussels has no choice but to play it tough. Not least because Eurosceptics will be watching for any sign of weakness – especially in Britain, where Mr Cameron has promised a referendum on EU membership in 2017.

“The EU will be under pressure to remove some of Switzerland’s privileges, as otherwise Eurosceptics in other countries, principally Britain, will assume you can pick and choose which bits of the EU suit you,” said Anand Menon, a Europe expert at London’s Chatham House think tank.

Another option – already being mooted in the Swiss liberal press – is a rerun of last Sunday’s vote, a scenario that has echoes of how the EU backed a rerun of the 2007 Lisbon Treaty vote in Ireland in an effort to secure the “right” result. Mr Blocher describes such a prospect as an insult to the “intelligence” of ordinary Swiss people, although he suspects Brussels will encourage it.

In the meantime, he looks forward to seeing Britain vote in a referendum on the EU – and he points out in the wake of Switzerland’s decision, the land of Churchill would no longer be “going it alone”.

“I would be happy to see the British leave the EU,” he smiled. “It would give us a partner on the outside.”



An SVP election poster shows Switzerland surrounded by three crows. A slogan reads: ‘Open doors for abuse? No!’

robe congratulated him on the referendum, lamenting that Germany could not do the same.

“We are not an extremist party,” insisted Mr Blocher, sipping tea beneath a painting of two Alpine cows. “With regard to the adverts with the black sheep and the white sheep, it is not a reference to skin colour, but to the expression of being a black sheep in the family. When we say we want the black sheep to go, we mean criminals, not people from Africa.” None the less, it

direct democracy – if people are not satisfied, they have the possibility to change things.”

The question, now, though, is how severe the EU’s response will be. Brussels views the free movement treaty as part of a package of seven agreements, covering areas such as technological cooperation, agricultural trade and transport. And as Jean Asselborn, the Luxembourg foreign minister, put it last week, such agreements stand or fall together. “You can’t have privileged access to the

‘We had lost our independence and control on immigration’

Obama warns Syria as peace talks fail

RICHARD SPENCER
Middle East Correspondent

PRESIDENT BARACK Obama has threatened to “apply more pressure” on the Assad regime after the second round of Syrian peace talks ended yesterday with no progress and no date set for a third.

Lakhdar al-Brahimi, the UN envoy chairing the talks, apologised to the Syrian people for the failure to break the stalemate in Geneva. France said the regime had blocked any possibility of progress and Britain described the failure as a “serious setback”.

Washington’s Arab allies have already decided to unlock more arms supplies for rebel groups fighting President Bashar al-Assad, including significant portable anti-aircraft missiles that could be used against planes attacking civilians, according to diplomats.

Combined with an upsurge in fighting, particularly an intensive regime aerial bombardment of Aleppo in the north and the city of Yabroud near the Lebanese border, the latest development will further suspicions that the peace talks

have become an excuse to deepen the conflict rather than bring it to an end.

“We’re going to have to solve the underlying problem – a regime led by Bashar al-Assad that has shown very little regard for the wellbeing of his people,” Mr Obama said after a meeting in California with King Abdullah of Jordan, Syria’s neighbour and a key route for arms supplies to the rebels.

Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in pledging military support for the rebels, but its actual supplies of weaponry have been sporadic. Most of the rebels’ equipment has been either looted from the regime, carried over by defectors or bought with money raised by private donors, including in the Gulf states.

In part, Saudi Arabia has been stopped from sending heavy weaponry, including anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles by the United States, its own major arms supplier, which fears they will end up in the hands of jihadists.

A large consignment of arms from the former Yugoslavia were supplied through Jordan a year ago and, in late May or early June, a batch of Russian Konkurs anti-tank guided

missiles paid for by Saudi Arabia played a significant role in a number of battles north of Aleppo.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, citing a briefing by a Western diplomat, Chinese-made shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles are the next step up. “New stuff is arriving imminently,” the diplomat is quoted as saying.

The meeting between Mr

‘We owe it to the people to do all we can to make progress’

Obama and King Abdullah is unlikely to be a coincidence. The King is partly dependent on Saudi Arabian financing as well as American military backing for holding his fragile, resource-poor country together, but has also been concerned about the effect of the Syrian civil war spilling over into his territory.

It is already home to hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees; half his

population or more is made up of Palestinian refugees.

At the same time as making his promise to increase support for the Syrian rebels, Mr Obama pledged \$1 billion (£600 million) in loan guarantees to Jordan.

His words on continuing to press for regime change mark an apparently clear rejection of voices in Washington saying the rise of jihadism within the rebel movement means the US should support Mr Assad staying in power.

The US and Saudi Arabia, with strong British diplomatic support, have instead forged an alternative policy of rebuilding the non-jihadist rebels.

The end of the second round of talks in Geneva without any progress was predicted. Mr Brahimi made profuse apologies that such low expectations had been met. “I’m very, very sorry,” he said. “I think it is better that every side goes back and reflects, and takes their responsibility: do they want this process to continue or not?”

Although both sides agreed to meet again, there was no date set and even the agenda was disputed. Unusually, Mr

Brahimi openly placed more blame on one side, the regime, than the other.

William Hague, the Foreign Secretary, described the failure to establish a new round of Geneva talks as a “serious setback”, saying: “This cannot be the end of the road. With the war in Syria causing more death and destruction every day, we owe it to the people of Syria to do all we can to make progress towards a political solution.”

Laurent Fabius, the French foreign minister, said he blamed the “attitude of the Syrian regime, which blocked any progress on establishing a transition government and stepped up violence and acts of terror against the civilian population”.

Cynicism about the talks has only been fuelled by the regime’s bombardment of Aleppo, which has killed 400 people, including women and children, in the past fortnight. The Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, a British-based monitoring group, said the total number of deaths in the war had now passed 140,000, with the period since the Geneva talks started the bloodiest yet.

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