

“It would be best to terminate the agreement on free movement”

By Edgar Bloch

Interview with Christophe Blocher, UDC leader

Christoph Blocher is the leader of the Democratic Union of the Centre (UDC), the party behind the popular initiative against mass immigration, which obtained the majority (50.3%) of the votes cast in a referendum, on 9 February in Switzerland. He discusses the vote with Europolitics.

Your initiative instructs the Federal Council to use the three years at its disposal to negotiate the reintroduction of immigration quotas with Brussels. But what is there to negotiate, since quotas are incompatible with free movement?

It needs to be clearly spelled out to the EU that Switzerland has rejected free movement and wants nothing to do with it. A compromise could be possible with Brussels, consisting of giving priority to hiring workers active on the Swiss market, while showing willingness to recruit EU nationals as a second circle, giving them preference over citizens from the rest of the world. That isn't my idea, but this would be a way of giving priority to the EU.

Otherwise?

Legally, the situation is very clear. One provision enables us to negotiate free movement with Brussels, another gives us the right to revise the agreement if difficulties occur, which is in line with the situation today. There is also a third possibility that consists simply of terminating the agreement. We are criticised for being hostile to law, but termination is written in the text in black and white.

So you are not opposed to termination of the agreement on free movement?

If we cannot agree, it is preferable to terminate it. Of course, other agreements are also jeopardised, but I'll take that risk because I don't think Brussels will terminate them.

You seem very sure of yourself.

To go into detail, I would point out that the six agreements that come under the guillotine clause - namely those on technical barriers to trade, public procurement, agriculture, air and surface transport and research

- are primarily in the EU's interest, even if they are also significant for Switzerland. Take the agreement on North-South road transport, for instance: it is essential for Brussels because the Benelux states, Germany, Italy, Spain and Greece are directly concerned. The same is true for technical barriers to trade, and I know what I'm speaking about: as a businessman, I export a lot to the EU and we worked out effective solutions with it before this agreement existed. The EU exports more to Switzerland than vice versa. In Germany, Angela Merkel under-



Blocher: “More centralism is needed”

stands this perfectly and has said that she does not want to give up these agreements. **But you minimise the fact that the current situation, notably with suspension of the Horizon 2020 programme, puts Switzerland in a tight spot, whereas the exclusion from research is a hard blow to its innovation.**

I hope that we will always stay outside Horizon 2020: Swiss Nobel winners had urged us not to join it. Science is global, not European. Horizon 2020 is a programme for distributing money to finance companies. We even found projects intended for Eritrea, which shows the confusion between research and development aid. Until we were associated with the programme, Switzerland was earning the greatest number of Nobel Prizes compared with its population; since then, we have won none. I can say the same for Erasmus Plus, a veritable self-service counter, providing support for

vegetarian or sustainable development programmes to conferences. These illustrate the problem experienced by the EU.

Researchers think just the opposite, in particular that not participating in these programmes will lead to a loss of quality of higher education institutes in Switzerland.

Anything can be made to seem more attractive. These programmes border on corruption. The word is strong but you have to ask yourself where the results are. Public money should not be used to support SMEs. Our polytechnic institutes used to be on a par with the best American universities, which have a much better reputation than those in Europe.

The first to congratulate Switzerland, on 9 February, were Marine Le Pen and the leaders of populist parties, from the Dutch to the Lega in Italy. Are you proud of being in such good company?

No, but their reactions are understandable. They are in the opposition, whereas we are simultaneously in the government and in the opposition, and in Switzerland the opposition is the people. Direct democracy is the possibility to say 'no'. Marine Le Pen shares our point of view and intends to take her country out of the EU. We are lucky enough not to be a member of this body and we have no intention of joining. Nor do we want free movement. The vote sparked a great deal of emotion, so much so that everyone imagined that we were in the EU. Europeans were amazed to see the people expressing themselves freely. The EU and its states immediately criticised us, but the next day the public opinions dreamed of being able to vote like the Swiss.

Does the EU have a future, in your opinion?

More centralism is needed, but the states want nothing to do with that. The institution that holds power is the European Commission, but it is Germany that pays and gives the orders. The EU would be in a much better position if it were to change into a free trade area without a single currency. I'm afraid the euro is headed for its demise, even if I don't wish that to happen. ■