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Immigration, Black Sheep and Swiss Rage

By Elaine Sciolino, 8 October 2007

SCHWERZENBACH, Switzerland, Oct. 4 — The posters taped on the walls at a political rally here capture the rawness of Switzerland's national electoral campaign: three white sheep stand on the Swiss flag as one of them kicks a single black sheep away.



"To Create Security," the poster reads.

The poster is not the creation of a fringe movement, but of the most powerful party in Switzerland's federal Parliament and a member of the coalition government, an extreme right-wing party called the Swiss People's Party, or SVP. It has been distributed in a mass mailing to Swiss households, reproduced in newspapers and magazines and hung as huge billboards across the country.

As voters prepare to go to the polls in a general election on Oct. 21, the poster — and the party's underlying message — have polarized a country that prides

itself on peaceful consensus in politics, neutrality in foreign policy and tolerance in human relations.

Suddenly the campaign has turned into a nationwide debate over the place of immigrants in one of the world's oldest democracies, and over what it means to be Swiss.

"The poster is disgusting, unacceptable," Micheline Calmy-Rey, the current president of Switzerland under a one-year rotation system, said in an interview. "It stigmatizes others and plays on the fear factor, and in that sense it's dangerous. The campaign does not correspond to Switzerland's multicultural openness to the world. And I am asking all Swiss who do not agree with its message to have the courage to speak out."

Interior Minister Pascal Couchepin, of the Liberal

Democratic Party, has even suggested that the SVP's worship of Christoph Blocher, the billionaire who is the party's driving force and the current justice minister, is reminiscent of that of Italian fascists for Mussolini.

[On Saturday, a march of several thousand SVP supporters in Bern ended in clashes between hundreds of rock-throwing counter-demonstrators and riot police officers, who used tear gas to disperse them. The opponents of the rally, organized by a new group called the Black Sheep Committee, had tried to prevent the demonstrators from marching to Parliament.]

The message of the party resonates loudly among voters who have seen this country of 7.5 million become a haven for foreigners, including political refugees from places like



A protest against backers of the rightist Swiss People's Party ended in clashes and tear gas.

Kosovo and Rwanda. Polls indicate that the right-wing party is poised to win more seats than any other party in Parliament in the election, as it did in national elections in 2003, when its populist language gave it nearly 27 percent of the vote.

“Our political enemies think the poster is racist, but it just gives a simple message,” Bruno Walliser, a local chimney sweep running for Parliament on the party ticket, said at the rally, held on a Schwerzenbach farm outside Zurich. “The black sheep is not any black sheep that doesn’t fit into the family. It’s the foreign criminal who doesn’t belong here, the one that doesn’t obey Swiss law. We don’t want him.”

More than 20 percent of Swiss inhabitants are foreign nationals, and the SVP argues that a disproportionate number are law-breakers. Many drug dealers are foreign, and according to federal statistics, about 70 percent of the prison population is non-Swiss.

As part of its platform, the SVP party has begun a campaign seeking the 100,000 signatures necessary to force a referendum to let judges deport foreigners after they serve prison sentences for serious crimes. The measure also calls for the deportation of the entire family if the convicted criminal is a minor.

Human rights advocates warn that the initiative is reminiscent of the Nazi

practice of Sippenhaft, or kin liability, under which relatives of criminals were held responsible and punished for their crimes.

The party’s political campaign has a much broader agenda than simply fighting crime. Its subliminal message is that the influx of foreigners has somehow polluted Swiss society, straining the social welfare system and threatening the very identity of the country.

Unlike the situation in France, where the far-right National Front leader Jean-Marie Le Pen campaigned for president in the spring alongside black and ethnic Arab supporters, the SVP has taken a much cruder us-against-them approach.

In a short three-part campaign film, “Heaven or Hell,” the party’s message

head scarves; men sitting, not working.

The third segment shows “heavenly” Switzerland: men in suits rushing to work, logos of Switzerland’s multinational corporations, harvesting on farms, experiments in laboratories, scenes of lakes, mountains, churches and goats. “The choice is clear: my home, our security,” the film states.

The film was withdrawn from the party’s Web site after the men who acted in it sued, arguing they were unaware of its purpose. But over beer and bratwurst at the Schwerzenbach political rally, Mr. Walliser screened it for the audience, saying, “I’m taking the liberty to show it anyway.”

For Nelly Schneider, a 49-year-old secretary, the



Burning barricades in the streets of Bern.

is clear. In the first segment, young men inject heroin, steal handbags from women, kick and beat up schoolboys, wield knives and carry off a young woman. The second segment shows Muslims living in Switzerland — women in

party’s approach is “a little bit crass,” but appealing nevertheless. “These foreigners abuse the system,” she said after Mr. Walliser’s presentation. “They don’t speak any German. They go to prostitution and do drugs and drive fancy cars

and work on the black market. They don't want to work."

As most of the rest of Europe has moved toward unity, Switzerland has fiercely guarded its independence, staying out of the 27-country European Union and maintaining its status as a tax haven for the wealthy. It has perhaps the longest and most arduous process to become a citizen in all of Europe: candidates typically must wait 12 years before being considered.

Three years ago the SVP blocked a move to liberalize the citizenship process, using the image of dark-skinned hands snatching at Swiss passports. And though the specter of terrorism has not been a driving issue, some posters in southern Switzerland at the time showed a mock Swiss passport held by Osama bin Laden.

Foreigners, who make up a quarter of the Swiss work force, complain that it is harder to get a job or rent an apartment without a Swiss passport and that they endure everyday harassment that Swiss citizens do not.

James Philippe, a 28-year-old Haitian who has lived in Switzerland for 14 years and works for Streechurch, a Protestant storefront community organization, and as a hip-hop dance instructor, said he is regularly stopped by the police and required to show his papers and submit to body searches. He speaks German, French, Creole and

English, but has yet to receive a Swiss passport.

"The police treat me like I'm somehow not human," he said at the Streechurch headquarters in a working-class neighborhood of Zurich. "Then I open my mouth and speak good Swiss German, and they're always shocked.

"We come here. We want to learn. We clean their streets and do all the work they don't want to do. If they kick us out, are they going to do all that work themselves? We need them, but they need us too."

SVP officials insist that their campaign is not racist, just anticrime. "Every statistic shows that the participation of foreigners in crime is quite high," said Ulrich Schlüter, an SVP Parliament deputy who has also led an initiative to ban minarets in Switzerland. "We cannot accept this. We are the only party that addresses this problem."

But the SVP campaign has begun to have a ripple effect, shaking the image of Switzerland as a place of prosperity, tranquillity and stability — particularly for doing business. On Thursday, a coalition of business, union and church leaders in Basel criticized the SVP for what they called its extremism, saying, "Those who discriminate against foreigners hurt the economy and threaten jobs in Switzerland."

"In the past," said Daniele Jenni, a lawyer and the founder of the Black Sheep Committee who is running

for Parliament, "people were reluctant to attack the party out of fear that it might only strengthen it. Now people are beginning to feel liberated. They no longer automatically accept the role of the rabbit doing nothing, just waiting for the snake to bite."