# Switzerland sidelined

On 9 February 2014, Switzerland approved a referendum entitled 'Stop mass immigration'. The initiative, which passed with a narrow majority of 50.3 per cent, has sent shockwaves through Switzerland's R&D and scientific communities

Though drafted with the intention of curbing EU immigration – nearly 25 per cent of 8 million people who live in the country are foreign – it is not Switzerland's border, but its innovation sector, which will shoulder the immediate brunt of the referendum's consequences.

Before the vote, the EU recognised Switzerland as an 'associated country'. This classification meant that despite the fact that the country was not an EU Member State, it was eligible for the same funding opportunities available to those countries who are part of the EU.

In response to the Swiss vote against mass immigration, the EU has reclassified the country as an 'industrialised third country', putting it in the same category as Australia, Canada and the US. As such, Switzerland's innovation sector – which has consistently been ranked as the best in Europe – will face limitations from major funding bodies, including Horizon 2020 and the European Research Council (ERC). Notably:

- Swiss entities may participate in Horizon 2020 to a degree, but as an industrialised third country they are no longer automatically eligible for funding
- Swiss participants will not count towards the minimum number of participants required for a project
- Switzerland will no longer be able to take part in individual projects
- Researchers, institutions and companies based in the country are not eligible to apply for funding from the ERC; however, Swiss researchers hosted in a Member State or associated country are still eligible to apply

Switzerland is attempting to rebuild its relations with the EU and to regain full association to Horizon 2020 as soon as possible. Though it is not known how successful these attempts will be, on 30 April, the State Secretariat for Education Research and Innovation (SERI), Switzerland, released a statement that it is aiming for researchers 'to receive direct funding from Brussels from the actual start of the research projects in the autumn of 2014'. For the time being, the Federal Council and the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF) are working to fill the funding gap that has erupted in the nation. The Federal Council will provide direct support to researchers who have been excluded from Horizon 2020, while the SNSF will offer excellent researchers temporary substitutes for ERC funding schemes.

# Swiss Science and Innovation Council

**Professor Dr Gerd Folkers**, Vice President of the Council, discusses the research landscape in Switzerland and how it will be affected by the country's recent classification as an 'industrialised third country'

**What is your professional background, and what led to you taking up your current role in the Swiss Science and Innovation Council (SSIC)?**

My background is medicinal chemistry. Since 2004, I have run the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich, Switzerland, which is a joint initiative of ETH Zurich and the University of Zurich; it is dedicated to the empirical study of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research. Later, I became an elected member of the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), and I also became a member of the SSIC; eventually, I rose to the position of Vice President.

Through my experience in establishing many transdisciplinary projects at the Collegium Helveticum, I have realised that one is always confronted with a plethora of epistemiological, ideological, financial and administrative problems and barriers. I have used this experience to meet the aims and needs of the Council.

**What are the SSIC's overarching goals?**

The SSIC serves as an independent advisory body to the Federal Council. Our goal, in conformity with our role as an independent consultative organisation, is to promote a framework that successfully develops Swiss higher education, research and innovation systems.

**How will the backlash from the passage of the 'Stop mass immigration' initiative and Switzerland's subsequent reclassification as an industrialised third country affect your activities?**

Our activities will be considerably affected. The SSIC strongly believes that science is a global enterprise and that restricting the exchange of concepts, results and, most importantly, brains will cause a fundamental disadvantage. Swiss scientists, as all scientists, are dependent on global collaboration. We should be able to take leading responsibilities in projects and host colleagues from all over the world. Though the situation may not be immediately drastic in programmes that are already running and receiving financial support, it is my observation that Swiss science will suffer heavily, both from the 'bad image' the referendum has evoked in Europe and from the prevention of Swiss researchers from joining future European projects as leading representatives.

**After receiving the results of the referendum, the scientific community of Switzerland launched 'Not without Switzerland', an appeal for an open European higher education area. What are your thoughts on the initiative?**

The immigration referendum did not aim to hamper science, which is highly important to and progressive in Switzerland, and it is also a continuing source of wealth across Europe. The appeal is asking that these facts be recognised, and that Swiss and European decision makers take steps to ensure the ongoing participation of Switzerland in Horizon 2020. The appeal points to the long tradition of Swiss science being an integral part of European science and asks for help from the European scientific community to prevent such harsh reactions springing forth from a deeply democratic decision.

**The region is home to several large flagship projects – notably CERN and the Human Brain Project. How will such initiatives be affected by this new ruling?**

Certainly very badly. Recruiting processes, project initiatives and funding allocation will have to be reconsidered and loaded with quite a bit of bureaucracy. Also, there are fears that some European scientists may believe the Swiss flagship projects will be home to a hostile atmosphere and therefore will not consider joining them. However, since CERN is a globally unmatched and 'unique machine', I am hopeful that it may be the place where political solutions to this problem can be found.

**There are some areas – notably environmental science – that present pan-European challenges. How can unity be ensured for future research efforts in these areas?**

I firmly believe in the 'normative force of reality', and environmental science – in addition to other pan-European challenges such as healthcare, ageing, and energy and water issues – is a research field in which Switzerland cannot and will not act alone. To ensure unity, the political sphere will have to be made aware of the interdisciplinary necessities of such research endeavours.

**What does the future hold for the SSIC?**

In general, it is very important to increase our political and economic independence. Personally, I would like to push the SSIC to detect trends in science earlier in the process and to act accordingly, rather than to mount an *ex post* reaction. The truly interdisciplinary culture of the Council and the open-mindedness that I experience all the time is the perfect precondition for achieving this goal.

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