Switzerland:
Success with Traditional Minorities,
Challenges with New Immigrants

THOMAS FLEINER / MAYA HERTIG RANDALL

In his humorous depiction of Switzerland called "Switzerland for Beginners," author George Mikes describes the Swiss Confederation as the biggest country in the world. He is referring to the Swiss phenomenon of moving to a neighbouring canton feeling like a move to another country. There is often a different language spoken, a different religion practiced, and a different culture in place. Put differently, despite a territory of only 41,290 km – less than a tenth of the size of Spain – Switzerland is a big country in terms of diversity.

The Swiss Federation was created in 1848 after a religiously motivated civil war, uniting 26 cantons, 2715 municipalities, four national languages: German (spoken by 64 percent), French (20 percent), Italian (6.5 percent), and Romansch (0.5 percent), as well as two major religions: Roman Catholicism (practiced by 42 percent) and Protestantism (33 percent), not to mention the tiny minority of Jewish and Old Catholic creeds. With 20 percent of the population, foreign nationals further enhance Switzerland's diversity.

In contrast to ethnic federations, such as Belgium, linguistic, religious, cultural, and economic boundaries generally do not coincide in Switzerland;

however the resulting cleavages tend to counterbalance each other, which is conducive to internal cohesion and stability. Switzerland distinguishes itself not only from ethnic federations but also from traditional nation states that are based on either the French or the German model of nationhood. The Swiss nation is known as "nation of will" or "nation by choice" and is conceived of as neither a unitary, indivisible entity based on a civic identity (the French model) nor as a homogeneous ethno-cultural unit (the German model). It is conceptualized as a composite nation, based on shared values and the citizens' will to live together within one state. Every Swiss national simultaneously holds a municipal, cantonal, and federal citizenship, each of which reflects one of three complementary identities. The Swiss Constitution explicitly recognizes diversity as a foundational value that is to be promoted, considering linguistic, religious, and cultural differences an integral part of an overarching Swiss political identity. As a consequence, the four traditional languages are all equally recognized as national languages of the Swiss Federation despite their numerical strength. Other constitutional and statutory provisions provide for fair representation of the linguistic communities in federal institutions. More generally, the proportional election system to the Swiss National Council (the chamber of Parliament representing the people), the egalitarian representation of the cantons in the second chamber (the Council of States), as well as power sharing and a consensus-driven political culture marked by self restraint, ensure that smaller communities are not outvoted. For instance, since 1959 the four major political parties represented in the federal parliament have shared power in the Federal Council and decisions are generally made by consensus.

Power sharing and the quest for consensus have been greatly favoured by direct democracy, used frequently on all three levels of government and constituting an essential element of Swiss national identity. At the federal order, the popular initiative enables minorities to gain political influence by proposing a constitutional amendment and submitting it to a vote. Via the referendum, the citizens have the right to approve or reject federal statutes, international treaties, and constitutional amendments. The instruments of direct democracy also act as a safeguard against excessive centralization and guarantee the cantons a large degree of autonomy. At the cantonal order, they protect the substantive autonomy of the municipalities. The emphasis on collective autonomy of local communities rather than individual liberties is another typical feature of Swiss Federalism. Freedom is mainly understood in democratic and participatory terms. As much as possible, decisions are made at the level closest to the people in order to enhance individual voice. Federalism is thus understood as a prerequisite of democracy and not as an opposing principle. It is the key for a polity close to its citizens and governed by consent. A large amount of political, financial, and organizational autonomy is the main institutional and political means to accommodating Switzerland's diversity. This autonomy is the essential element of cantonal sovereignty, which is explicitly recognized in the federal Constitution, and also guarantees

that meaningful powers can be exercised at the municipal order. By granting local autonomy to cantons and municipalities, Switzerland ensures that different cultures are not ignored or confined to the private sphere.

The positive side of local autonomy is that it provides a homeland and a special identity for citizens and guarantees the right to be different. Based on their autonomy, cantons and, in many cases municipalities, decide on their official language for the administration, courts, and schools. They also define – within the limits of individual religious freedom – their relationship with the traditional churches, which leaves room for many different options. While some cantons recognize an official church, others follow a model of strict religious neutrality, based on the clear separation between church and state. Cantons, and sometimes even municipalities, have different religious holidays depending on the majority of their populations and their historical religious backgrounds. They are, moreover, free to grant their religious communities collective autonomy. Generally an asset for a multicultural federation, local autonomy empowers local democracies to develop their institutional, economic, and political solutions appropriate to their needs and interests. Moreover, local autonomy induces both competition among various polities and policy innovation.

> Federalism is thus understood as a prerequisite of democracy and not as an opposing principle. It is the key for a polity close to its citizens and governed by consent. A large amount of political, financial, and organizational autonomy is the main institutional and political means to accommodating Switzerland's diversity.

Nevertheless, the fragmented Swiss polity confronts many problems. The roots of Switzerland's diversity are mainly historical and concentrated in clearly defined territories. Currently, Switzerland needs to face up to the challenge of a new influx of diversity caused by modern migration, which lacks a clear territorial basis. How can foreign nationals be integrated within the Swiss concept of a "nation of will" composed of traditional diversities with an accommodation strategy heavily based on territorial autonomy? Another challenge to Switzerland's diversity is the strong impact and standardizing pressure emanating from the global and the European markets. A democracy such as Switzerland risks paralysis from parochialism. The tendency is to reject new diversities, adopting a policy of differential exclusion in order to insulate against outside influence. Switzerland's rejection of European Union membership is a case in point. Moreover, the mechanisms of direct democracy, which have played a crucial role in accommodating traditional diversities, tend to be used by right-wing, populist parties as a vehicle for discriminatory and xenophobic policies. Today's complexities require quick, efficient, and often costly solutions. Switzerland will only be able to uphold its unity in diversity by its federal and democratic structure. Thus it will have to find the way to cope with future fundamental challenges by adapting, developing, and modernizing federalism without undermining it.