

# SWISS PEOPLE'S PARTY (SCHWEIZERISCHE VOLKSPARTEI, SVP)

**IMPACT:** The Swiss People's Party (SVP) is Switzerland's leading far-right political party, established in 1971. Currently, the SVP is the strongest faction in the Nationalrat, the National Council. It is also part of the Federal Council, Switzerland's executive branch. The SVP was the catalyst behind the minaret ban in 2009 and has also launched other anti-Muslim campaigns to ban the face-veil. SVP politicians are internationally connected with other anti-Muslim movements and figures, including writer Udo Ulfkotte and Renaud Camus.

- The Swiss People's Party (Schweizerische Volkspartei, SVP), based in multilingual Switzerland, is also known under the names *Partida Populara Svizra* (PPS) in Romansh, Democratic Union of the Centre (*Union démocratique du centre*, UDC) in French, and *Unione Democratica di Centro* (UDC) in Italian. **SVP was founded in 1971 after a merger of three parties and has since pursued conservative social and economic policies. The policies include lower taxes and reduced spending, as well as the protection of Swiss agriculture and industry. SVP also opposed Swiss membership in the United Nations and the European Union.** The party is especially strong in the German-speaking cantons (states).
- From 1959 to 2003, both the Agrarian Party and its successor, SVP, had one seat on the Federal Council, Switzerland's seven-member executive branch. **Following the adoption of an anti-immigration agenda in the 1990s, SVP succeeded in winning the largest vote share and the second greatest number of seats in the lower house of the parliament in 1999.** In 2003, SVP was awarded an additional seat on the Federal Council. In 2008, a split of the party resulted in the formation of the Conservative Democratic Party (German: *Bürgerlich-Demokratische Partei*, BDP) by moderates. After a slight decrease in voter support, SVP again became the majority in 2019, winning 53 seats.
- SVP's shift to the far-right is credited to Christoph Blocher, who **“developed a eurosceptic and anti-immigration agenda that has shaken up the cozy post-war consensual system prevailing in neutral Switzerland,”** and has become “the dominant force in national politics.” According to political historian Damir Skenderovic, Blocher served as the de facto leader of the SVP and the party's symbol. Blocher is a former member of the Swiss Federal Council (2004–2007) and also served as vice president of his party until March 2018. When Steve Bannon was invited to the Swiss capital city of Zürich by Roger Köppel, editor-in-chief of Swiss conservative magazine *Die Weltwoche*, Bannon praised Blocher and called “Doctor Blocher” a “Trump before there was a Trump.”
- **Politicians of SVP argue that Islam is not a religion, but a fascist ideology.** Although Muslims made up a small minority—almost 6.1 percent of Switzerland's 2016 population—SVP's platform has been explicitly anti-Muslim. According to the party's program from 2015–2019, “Tolerance and openness are also part of our Christian heritage. However, this should not prevent us from critically appraising certain developments. [...] Radicalisation and isolation trends are problems that should not be underestimated. In our country, too, there are individuals and groups who sympathise with a radical Islam. At the same time, Islamic communities are raising their voices and calling for recognition as legal entities under public law or training for their spiritual leaders at our universities. These challenges and the demand for special legal treatment should not be naively accepted without criticism.”

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- In a section titled “Insisting on the rules,” the platform says: “Just as we adapt to the rules of Islamic states when we are guests there, we must systematically insist on the upholding of our laws here. Parallel societies with their own legal systems cannot be tolerated. Our legal order based on freedom must on no account give way to sharia law; our courts must not accept an Islamic cultural background as a reason for imposing a milder sentence. Toleration or even encouragement of practices such as forced marriages, honour killings, blood feuds, female circumcision, marriages involving minors or polygamy is totally unacceptable in our country. Our rule of law is duty-bound to call for the complete respect of our legal system by immigrants, too, and to avoid granting even what are seen as minor concessions.”
- The program further argues in detail: “Dispensations from swimming lessons, cancelling Christmas carols in kindergartens or special funeral arrangements are therefore unacceptable. Anyone who fails to support our free and democratic basic rights without reservation must not be granted Swiss citizenship.”
- **In November 2009, politicians from SVP and the Federal Democratic Union of Switzerland (Eidgenössisch-Demokratische Union, EDU) launched Egerkinger Committee, the infamous campaign for a minaret ban.** A poster of the campaign portrayed minarets appearing to launch, like missiles, off the Swiss flag behind a woman wearing the niqab. The campaign succeeded in advocating for a constitutional amendment to ban the construction of new minarets, backed by 57.5 percent of the participating voters. Article 72 (3) now says: “The construction of minarets is prohibited.” Churches, all other political parties, as well as international organizations such as Human Rights Watch opposed the campaign and the United Nations demanded a reversal of this article.
- **In 2010, SVP called for a ban of the face-veil, which the government declined. In March 2016, the Egerkinger Committee once again started collecting signatures to launch a ban of the face-veil and applied for a ban in October 2017, which was declined by the Federal Council in June 2018.** In June 2020, the national parliament voted 114 to 76 for rejecting the ban (with three abstentions). On a canton level, SVP succeeded in banning the face-veil in Tessin, where voters banned the face-veil 63,494 to 32,377. In September 2017, the parliament of the canton of St. Gallen passed a resolution banning veiling in public spaces.
- In February 2017, Switzerland held a referendum to ease the path of citizenship for third-generation immigrants and “allow the grandchildren of immigrants to skip several steps in the lengthy process of securing a Swiss passport.” In a campaign against the proposal, SVP “used posters showing a burqa-clad woman with the slogan ‘no unchecked naturalisation’ to fight the move.” **Although the campaign was “tainted by anti-Muslim messages and charges of religious prejudice,” the proposal “had nothing to do with religion at the outset,” according to Sophie Guignard of the Institute of Political Science at the University of Bern.** The proposal ultimately won with 60 percent support.
- In March 2009, MP Lukas Reimann (SVP) submitted a motion in the Federal Council calling for better surveillance of imams in Switzerland with the possibility to expel “extremists and hate preachers.” **SVP called for the creation of a monitoring center for imams**

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## and a possible related permit requirement for the exercise of their profession in Switzerland.

- As early as 2006, SVP politicians were involved in efforts by local committees in the canton of Bern to ban the construction of mosques. **City councilman Patrick Freudiger (SVP) recommended the writings of “Islam expert Hans-Peter Raddatz,” who is known for spreading conspiracy theories about a Muslim takeover of Europe. Other known anti-Muslim writers such as German Udo Ulfkotte had been invited to Switzerland in 2007 and 2009 to mobilize for the minaret ban.** In 2007, Ulfkotte was specifically invited by SVP and the *Egerkinger Committee* to give a talk on “The Creeping Islamization of Europe.” In November 2009, Ulfkotte additionally spoke during a conference on Islam along with Andreas Glarner, who was the SVP’s party whip in national parliament from 2005 to 2015.
- In addition to inviting speakers like Ulfkotte from abroad, SVP politicians have participated in numerous transnational activities. In September 2007, national MP Ulrich Schlüer (SVP) was scheduled to talk at the “Stop the Islamization of Europe” rally in Cologne.
- SVP politicians have also participated in the COMPACT-conferences, named after Jürgen Elsässer’s Compact magazine. Elsässer, a German journalist and political activist of the new right, regularly publishes anti-Muslim content. During the third COMPACT conference in November 2014 titled “Peace with Russia – For a sovereign Europe!” held in Berlin, several far-right politicians participated, including the German AfD’s Alexander Gauland and the SVP’s vice-president Oskar Freysinger. Freysinger praised Vladimir Putin for “building democracy, where people are more free than in Western Europe.” AfD’s André Poggenburg and Germany Pegida’s Lutz Bachmann as well as Martin Sellner gave a speech next to Freysinger.
- In November 2014, French activist Pierre Cassen was invited by SVP’s Oskar Freysinger to give a talk titled “Islam: A danger for our democracy?” in Savièse, in the canton of Valais. In addition to Cassen and Freysinger, the talk was also attended by SVP politician Jean-Luc Addor, who then became national MP. Cassen previously participated in the “Counterjihad Conference” in the European Parliament in July 2012. In January 2015, Addor also collaborated with Cassen to launch the Pegida France initiative in Paris. The launch was further aided by the French Identitarian movement “*Bloc Identitaire*,” the representative of the German Pegida, Melanie Dittmer, and Renaud Camus. **Camus is the most important thinker of Europe’s New Right and introduced the widespread Great Replacement theory, which speculates that non-white Muslim people are going to “replace” white people in Western nations by becoming a larger percentage of the population.** He also spoke at an international conference on “The Islamization of our countries” in December 2010 in Paris, after which he was convicted of instilling hatred for calling Muslims “soldiers” and “conquerors.”
- In August 2020, Marco Chiesa was elected president of SVP. According to reporting in *Reuters*, Chiesa stood in support of the party’s campaign in a Sept. 27 referendum on ending free movement of people with the European Union (EU), and was stated as saying, “I don’t want to have to watch how Swiss families suffer from the burden of millions of

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immigrants from the European Union.”

- In September 2020, Swiss voters rejected the SVP proposal to end free movement throughout the EU by a 63-37 percent margin. According to reporting in *Al Jazeera*, “The SVP painted a gloomy picture of young foreigners supplanting older Swiss citizens, housing prices rising, schools and transport becoming overcrowded and construction running rampant.” CNN additionally reports that “around two-thirds of the 2.1 million foreigners living in Switzerland in 2019 were citizens of the EU” and “more than 450,000 Swiss live in the EU.”

Bridge Initiative Factsheet