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Measuring emigration

Migration plans and trajectories in Switzerland: length of stay and emigration

Note by Swiss Federal Statistical Office*

Abstract

Immigrants make plans for how long they will stay in the host society and for their eventual emigration to another country or to their country of origin. These migration projects have an impact on the host society, but also on the country of destination. Their length of residence in the host country, the reasons for emigration and the next destination country of migrants are therefore relevant issues to study. Whether or not these migration projects are carried out is also of utmost interest.

Using results of the "Migration" module of the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS) and of the Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS), this paper will present cross-sectional and longitudinal data addressing these issues. While the survey focuses on the immigrants' migration projects, the register-based longitudinal statistics show the actual migration trajectories of migrants.

Results show that the foreign-born population perceives migration to Switzerland as something permanent, as two-thirds of them plan to stay in Switzerland indefinitely. When immigrants are nonetheless planning to leave Switzerland, they most often wish to move back to their country of origin. Longitudinal data show that, among persons who immigrated to Switzerland, half of them had left the country after 10 years. Close to a quarter of people who left Switzerland return to the country over a period of 10 years.

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I. Introduction

1. When people migrate, they make plans for how long they will stay in the host country and for their eventual further emigration to another country or to their country of origin. The decision to move to another country for a shorter or longer period of time is the result of a wide variety of circumstances, often linked to different stages in a person's life. These migration projects have an impact on the host country, but also on the country of destination. Short-term migrants will not have the same integration needs as long-term migrants. They will also not contribute to the same extent to the country to which they migrate. Whether the migration is temporary or permanent will also have an impact on the migrants' living conditions and their well-being. Negative effects are indeed more likely to occur immediately after immigration, while positive effects are more frequent over a longer period of time. The length of residence in the host country, the reasons for emigration and the next destination country of emigrants are therefore relevant issues to study. Whether or not these migration plans are carried out is also of utmost interest. How many people actually re-emigrate after having immigrated and after how long? Do they eventually come back later on, thereby completing a full loop?
2. Using results from the "Migration" module of the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS) and the Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS), this paper will present cross-sectional and longitudinal data addressing these issues. While the survey focuses on the foreign-born population's future migration plans, the register-based longitudinal statistics show the actual trajectories of migrants over time.

II. Methods

3. The "Migration" module provides information on the history and situation of populations with a migration background. The module is included in the SLFS every three or four years. The last three data collections occurred in 2014, 2017 and 2021. The survey deals with a number of topics such as transnationalism, naturalisation, conditions upon arrival, reasons for immigration and migration plans for the future. The reference population is the permanent resident population – born abroad or in Switzerland – aged between 15 and 74. Asylum seekers (permits N) and provisionally admitted foreigners (permits F) are excluded from the sample. From the full SLFS 2021 sample (approximately 100,000 interviews), only a sub-sample of 18,630 people was selected to participate in the "Migration" module.
4. The Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS) is based on the population data from the Population and Household Statistics (STATPOP). They started on 31.12.2010 and comprise all people in the permanent and non-permanent resident population who have appeared at least once in STATPOP (cumulative population stocks or flows). Taking into account the non-permanent population allows us to study a type of population who is often more mobile and whose length of stay thus tends to be shorter than the permanent population. The DVS ends with the latest available STATPOP data and are thus completed and fully updated every year. Around 11 million entries of persons were counted up to 2022. The DVS provides information on births, deaths, immigration, emigration, residence permits, naturalisation and marital status events.

III. Results

5. In 2022, around one third of Switzerland's permanent resident population was born abroad. Among those foreign-born residents, around 38% have lived in the country for less than 10 years. 24% immigrated to Switzerland 10 to 20 years ago, 15% did it 20 to 30 years ago. 21% have been living in Switzerland for at least 30 years. This shows that a part of migration movements to and from Switzerland are temporary and that a significant part of people who have immigrated to Switzerland will probably leave the country in the future.

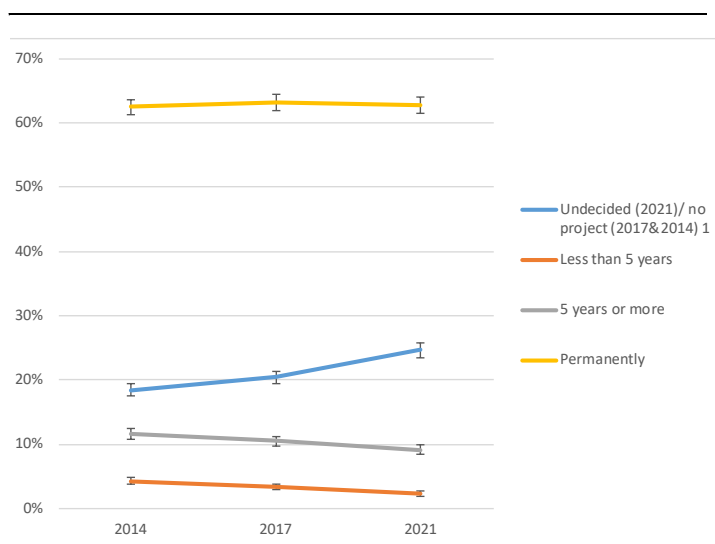
A. Migration plans

1. Length of stay

6. In 2021, 63% of the permanent resident population aged 15 to 74 who were born abroad and immigrated to Switzerland said that they wanted to stay in Switzerland permanently (cf. Graph 1). 9% planned to stay for at least 5 years and only 2% intended to leave Switzerland in less than 5 years. 25% were still undecided. The proportion of foreign-born people planning to stay in Switzerland indefinitely has remained the same between 2014 and 2021. The percentage of those who plan to stay for a fixed period has slightly decreased over the observation period. In 2021, the "not yet decided" category replaced the "no plans" category. The shares are therefore not comparable between 2017 and 2021.

Graph 1

Plans for the length of stay in Switzerland, 2014-2021



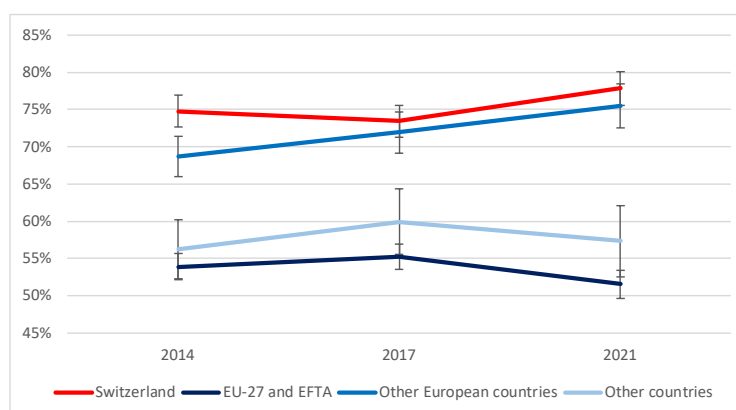
¹ Break in series between 2017 and 2021 for methodological reasons

Source: FSO – Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), migration module

7. While most migrants intend to stay in Switzerland permanently, Swiss citizens (78%) and citizens of other European countries outside the EU and EFTA (76%) were more likely to say that they want to stay permanently than citizens of other countries in the world (57%) and citizens of the EU-27 and EFTA countries (52%) (cf. Graph 2).

Graph 2

Share of people planning to stay in Switzerland permanently by nationality groups, 2014-2021



Source: FSO – Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), migration module

(a) Naturalisation as a will to stay permanently in Switzerland?

8. In 2021, 88% of the permanent resident population of foreign or stateless persons aged 15 to 74 and holding a B or C permit had not applied for naturalisation, while 12% had applied. Citizens of EU-27 and EFTA countries were more likely to have not applied for naturalisation to obtain Swiss nationality (92%) than citizens of other European countries (78%) and citizens of other countries in the world (85%).
9. 64% of the population who had not made a naturalisation application to obtain Swiss nationality intended to do so in the future, 29% had no such intention. Again, a smaller proportion of citizens from EU-27 and EFTA countries intended to apply for Swiss nationality (61%) than citizens of other European countries (74%) and citizens of other countries in the world (69%).
10. It is therefore interesting to see that the group of population who has the lowest intent of staying permanently in Switzerland, i.e., citizens of EU-27 and EFTA countries, also shows the lowest rates of naturalisation requests and intentions. On 21 June 1999, the European Union and Switzerland signed the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP). The AFMP lifts restrictions on EU citizens wishing to live or work in Switzerland. The right of free movement is complemented by the mutual recognition of professional qualifications, by the right to buy property, and by the coordination of social insurance systems. The same rules also apply to citizens of EFTA member states. The AFMP came into force in 1 June 2002. As it is easier for citizens of EU-27 and EFTA countries to freely move from and to Switzerland, obtaining Swiss nationality is less essential than for citizens of other European countries and of other countries in the world.

2. Destination country of next emigration

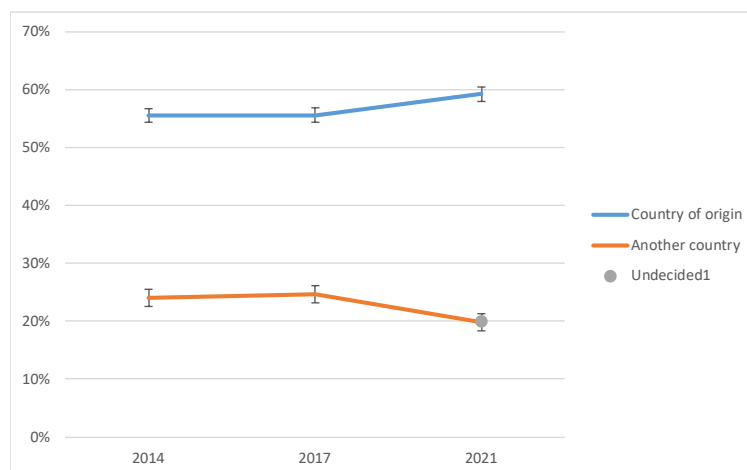
11. In 2021, 59% of people aged 15 and 74 who were born abroad and intend to leave Switzerland at one point in time would like to return to their country of origin¹ (cf. Graph 3). 20% planned to emigrate

¹ The country of origin is defined as the country of birth, the country of citizenship or the country where the persons have lived for a long time. If in doubt, the choice is theirs.

to another country. The remaining 20% were still undecided. These proportions did not significantly evolve over the observation period. The “undecided” category was added in 2021 and contributes to a large extent to the reduction of the non-response rate – which was high until 2017.

Graph 3

Destination country of next emigration, 2014-2021



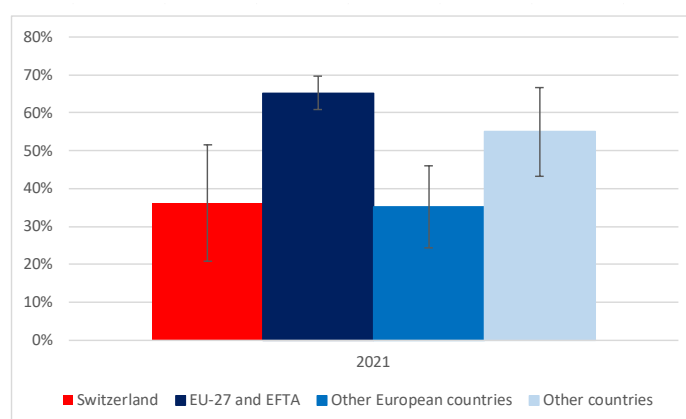
¹From 2021

Source: FSO – Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), migration module

12. While most migrants intend to move back to their country of origin in 2021, the citizens of the EU-27 and EFTA countries and of other countries had more often such a project (resp. 65% and 55%) than Swiss nationals and citizens of other European countries (resp. 36% and 35%) (cf. Graph 4).

Graph 4

Share of people intending to move back to their country of origin by nationality groups, 2021



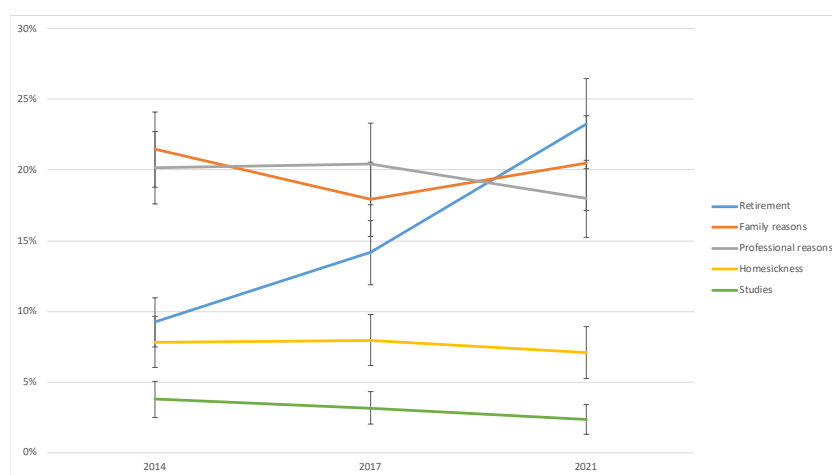
Source: FSO – Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), migration module

3. Retirement as a growing reason for emigration

13. There are many reasons why people who were born abroad and who have immigrated to Switzerland wish to leave the country. In 2021, these are the five most mentioned reasons: retirement (23%), family reasons (20%), professional reasons (18%), homesickness (7%) and studies (2%) (cf. Graph 5). In comparison with 2014, retirement was mentioned 2.5 times more often in 2021. As for the other reasons, their shares have on average remained stable between 2014 and 2021.

Graph 5

Reasons for leaving Switzerland, 2014-2021



Source: FSO – Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), migration module

B. Migration trajectories : longitudinal population statistics

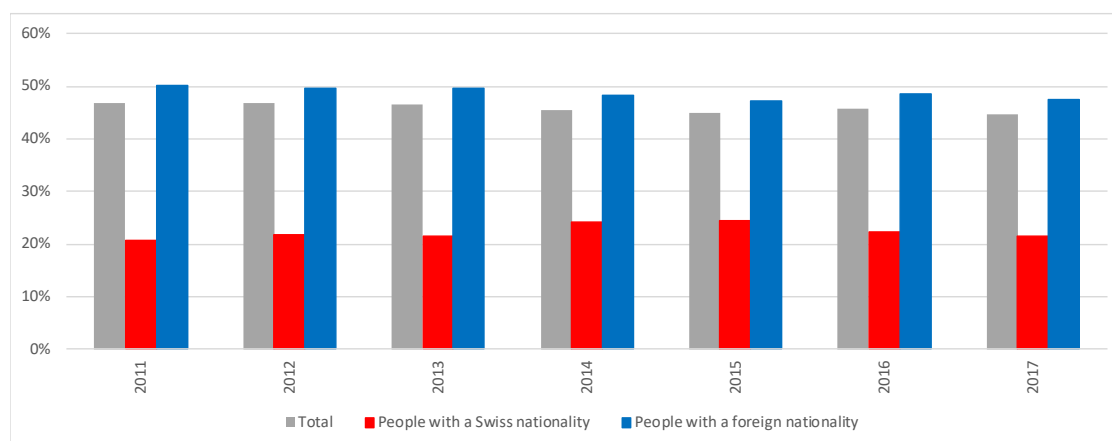
14. Population statistics essentially provide cross-sectional data that describes the permanent resident population at a given point in time (stocks). Data that reflect flows are used in demographic analysis to track changes occurring between two stock measurements. It compares population stocks at many consecutive points in time – at the end of each trimester in the case of Longitudinal Demographic Statistics (DVS) – and thus records how the situation of each individual changes over time. Published for the first time in 2021, these statistics shed new light on the migration phenomenon in Switzerland. Immigration and emigration cohorts – i.e., individuals who share the same event in the same calendar year – can be tracked over time. The DVS enriches statistics on migration in Switzerland, first and foremost, because it provides new information on circular and pendular migration. It also makes it possible to gain better understanding of length of stay and provides a detailed record of short-term migratory movements or migratory movements that occur at short intervals. The DVS allows for distinguishing population type (permanent resident or non-permanent resident population). As in the general dissemination of migration biographies, this analysis chooses to include both population types. The longitudinal migration indicators presented in the following sections (re-emigration, return migration, circular migration) are based on the recommendations of the UNECE guidance on the use of longitudinal data for migration statistics (UNECE, 2020).

1. Re-emigration

15. In 2011, 251,000 persons immigrated to Switzerland. After 5 years, nearly half of these persons had left Switzerland again (47%) (cf. Graph 6). After 10 years, this share was only slightly higher (53%). In both cases – after 5 or after 10 years – the share of persons having re-emigrated was more than two times higher among people with a foreign nationality (50%) than among Swiss nationals (21%). When we look at the seven different immigration cohorts (2011-2017) independently of nationality, we can see that the one with the highest re-emigration rate after 5 years is the immigration cohort of 2011. For Swiss people, the immigration cohort of 2015 is the one with the highest re-emigration rate. For people with a foreign nationality, it is the immigration cohort of 2011.

Graph 6

Share of people having re-emigrated after 5 years by immigration cohort and nationality groups (Swiss vs. foreigners)

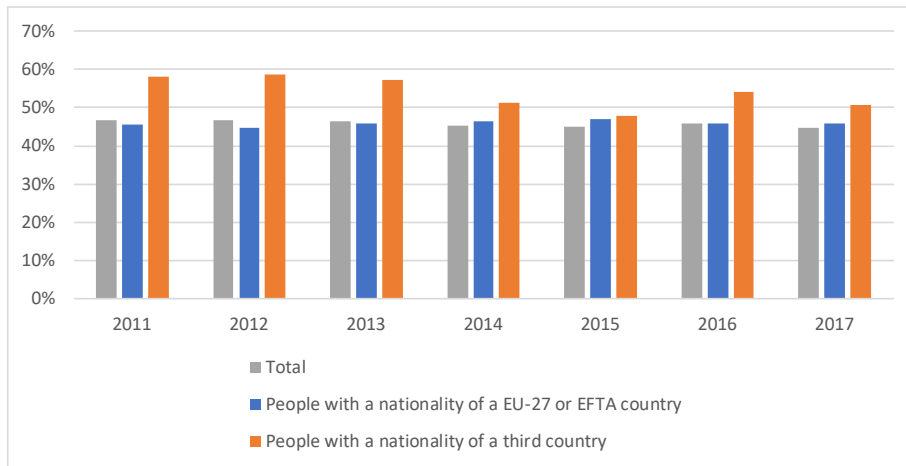


Source: FSO - Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS)

16. Looking at the re-emigration behaviour of foreign people born abroad according to their nationality, we can see that, among every immigration cohort, third-country nationals are more likely to have re-emigrated after 5 years than citizens of EU-27 or EFTA countries (cf. Graph 7). The gap between both nationality groups has however been decreasing over the immigration cohorts.

Graph 7

Share of foreigners having re-emigrated after 5 years by immigration cohort and nationality groups (EU/EFTA vs. third countries)

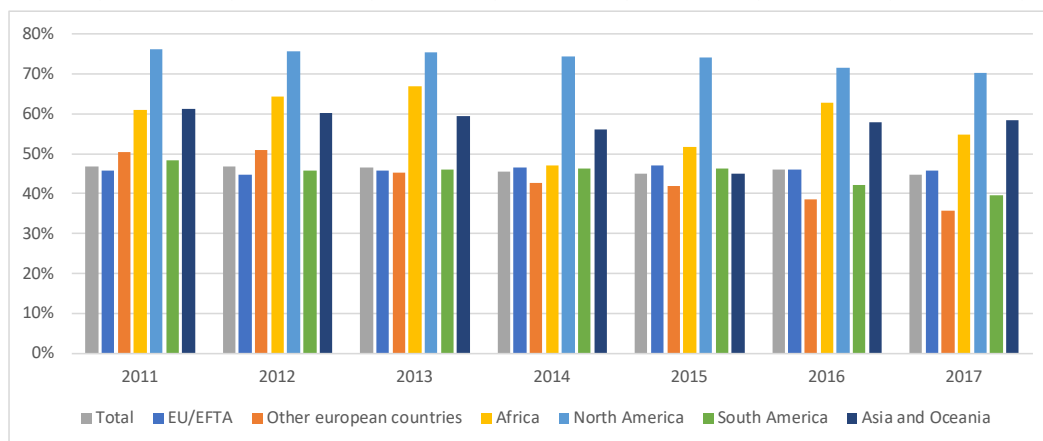


Source: FSO - Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS)

17. Within the immigration cohort of 2011, North Americans are characterised by a particularly high frequency of re-emigration during the 5 years following immigration (76%), followed by Asians or Oceanians (61%), Africans (61%) and South Americans (48%). The lowest rates are observed among people with a nationality of one of EU-27 or AELE countries (46%). Within the immigration cohort of 2017, the order remained mostly unchanged. Citizens of EU-27 or AELE countries are however the fourth nationality group with the highest re-emigration rates (46%), before South Americans (40%) and other Europeans (36%). This is not due to an increase of re-emigration rates among the former, but to a decrease of re-immigration rates among the two latter nationality groups.

Graph 8

Share of foreigners having re-emigrated after 5 years by immigration cohort and nationality groups (continents)



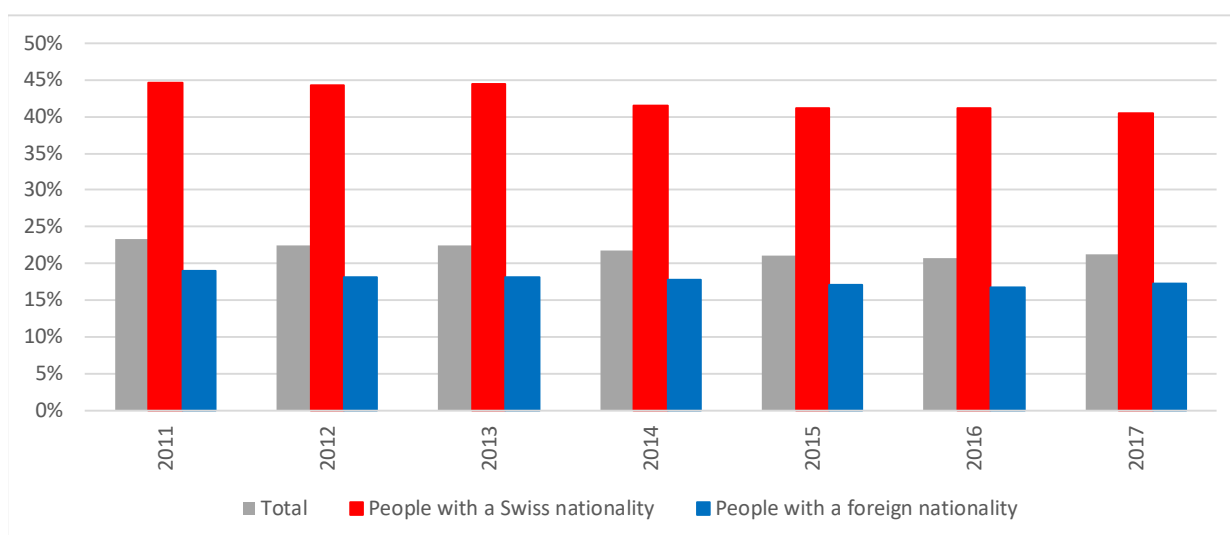
Source: FSO - Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS)

2. Return migration

18. Among the 188, 000 persons who left Switzerland in 2011, 23% were back in the country 5 years later (cf. Graph 9). This share was the same after 10 years. After 5 years, the return rate was two times higher among Swiss people (45%) than among people with a foreign nationality (19%). After 10 years, this ratio was equal to 3 (51% in comparison with 17%). Among the emigration cohort of 2011, more Swiss people were back in the country after 10 years than after 5 years. The opposite can be observed for people with a foreign nationality². When we look at the seven different emigration cohorts (2011-2017) independently of nationality, we can see that the one with the highest re-entry rate after 5 years is the immigration cohort of 2011. The same can be observed for Swiss people and people with a foreign nationality.

Graph 9

Share of people having returned to Switzerland after 5 years by emigration cohort and nationality groups (Swiss vs. foreigners)



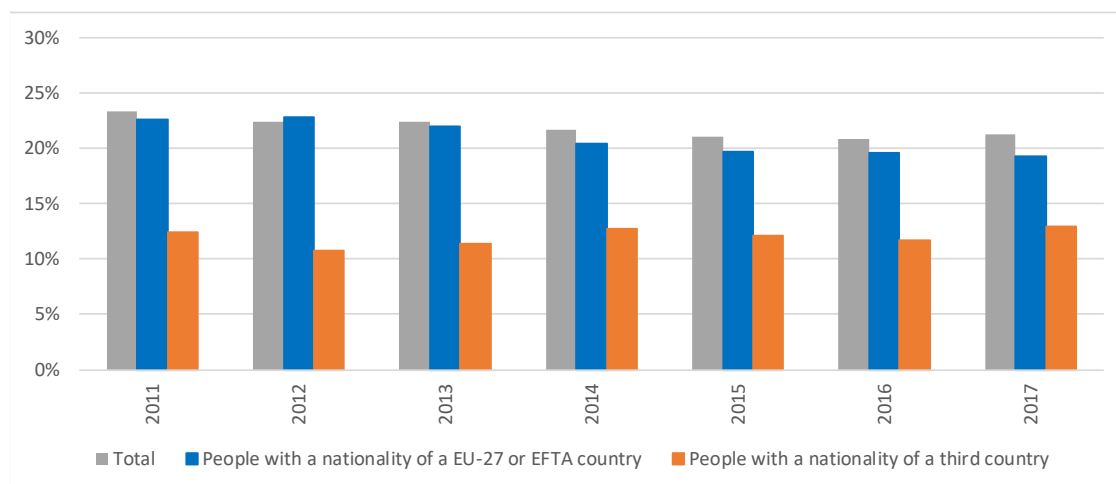
Source: FSO - Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS)

19. Looking at the re-entry behaviour of foreign citizens who left Switzerland according to their nationality, we can see that, among every emigration cohort, citizens of EU-27 or AELE countries are more likely to have returned to Switzerland after 5 years than third-country nationals (cf. Graph 10).

² Among people with a foreign nationality, some returned to Switzerland and then left again. For this reason, the return migration rate of foreigners after 10 years is lower than after 5 years. People with more than one movement are also taken into account.

Graph 10

Share of foreigners having returned to Switzerland after 5 years by emigration cohort and nationality groups (EU/EFTA vs. third countries)

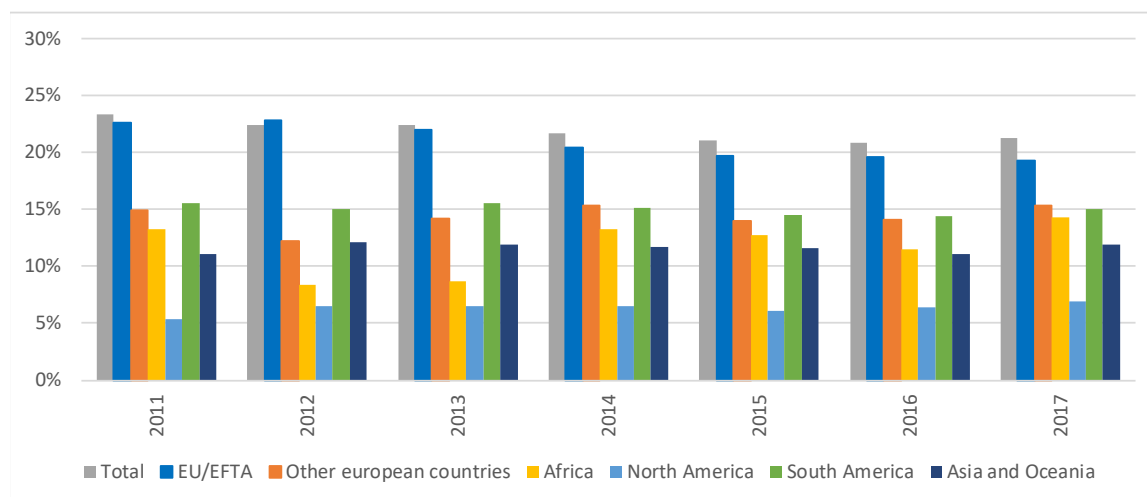


Source: FSO - Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS)

20. Within the emigration cohort of 2011, citizens of EU-27 or AELE countries are characterised by higher re-entry rates after 5 years (23%), followed by South Americans (16%), other Europeans (15%), Africans (13%) and Asians or Oceanians (11%). The lowest rates are observed among North Americans (5%). The same rates can be observed in most emigration cohorts.

Graph 11

Share of foreigners having returned to Switzerland after 5 years by emigration cohort and nationality groups (continents)



Source: FSO - Longitudinal demographic statistics (DVS)

3. Circular migration

21. According to the UNECE guidance on the use of longitudinal data for migration statistics (UNECE, 2020), a circular migrant is a person who has crossed the national border of Switzerland at least three times over the past 10 years, each time with a duration of stay – abroad or in the country – of at least 12 months. Among the 366,000 people who migrated from or to Switzerland in 2011, 2% became circular migrants. Swiss citizens became more often circular migrants than people with a foreign nationality (4% compared to 2%). 2% of foreigners with a passport from one of the EU-27 or AELE countries – who migrated from or to Switzerland in 2011 – have become circular migrants over the 10 following years. The same rate can be observed for foreign citizens from a third country. The highest percentage of circular migrants is observed among Asians or Oceanians (3%), the lowest among Africans (1%).

IV. Conclusion

22. The aim of this paper was to show migration plans people build for their future and how those plans are actually carried out.
23. Using results of the "Migration" module of the SLFS and of the DVS, this paper presents both cross-sectional and longitudinal data addressing these issues.
24. Cross-sectional data showed that immigration to Switzerland is most often seen as something permanent. Close to two-thirds of foreign-born people who immigrated to Switzerland and became part of the permanent resident population plan to stay in Switzerland indefinitely. Citizens of the EU-27 and EFTA countries are, however, the least likely to have such a project in comparison with foreign-born people with other nationalities. They have also less often requested Swiss citizenship and intend less often to do so. Thus, regarding migration plans, foreign citizens benefiting from the right of free movement intend more often to be mobile. Their integration process – that could be “finalized” by obtaining Swiss nationality – seems to be less of a priority to them, as they do not need the Swiss passport as much as other citizens to move.
25. Longitudinal data illustrate how these migration plans are carried out. The results show that nearly half of the people who immigrated to Switzerland (and became part or not of the permanent resident population) have already left the country after a period of 5 years, this share being higher among foreign people. Third-country nationals are more likely to have re-immigrated after 5 years than citizens of EU-27 or EFTA countries. This gap between both nationality groups has been decreasing over the immigration cohorts that can be observed so far. North-Americans and Africans show the highest re-immigration rates after 5 years.
26. Close to one quarter of people who left Switzerland are back in the country 5 years later, a rate being twice higher among people with a Swiss nationality than people with a foreign nationality. Citizens of EU-27 or AELE countries are more likely to have returned to Switzerland after 5 years than third-country nationals. North Americans are characterised by the lowest re-entry rates after 5 years.
27. Circular migration is still a rare phenomenon concerning around 2% of people migrating from or to Switzerland. No clear differences can be observed between different nationality groups.
28. This paper is an exploratory analysis which shows the analytical potential of combining cross-sectional survey and longitudinal registry data. The results demonstrate that the passport held, as well as the migration regime, shape mobility behaviours. A future avenue of analysis would be to

take into account the reasons for immigration as a determinant factor for further migratory movements.

V. Bibliography

UNECE (2020). Guidance on the use of longitudinal data for migration statistics. Geneva: United Nations.