

OPERATION LIBERO

1. A movement created spontaneously in 2014, in Bern, Switzerland.

The Operation Libero movement was officially born in Bern, Switzerland, on October 13th, in 2014, in reaction to the vote concerning popular initiative "Against mass immigration", that had been accepted on February 9th and validated on March 19th of that same year.

The initiative "Against mass immigration" added an article to the Swiss Federal Constitution stating that Switzerland "manages the immigration of foreigners autonomously", through the setting of annual quotas that meet the needs of the economy, "in compliance with the principle of national preference". This measure aims to curb immigration from European Union countries because, according to its initiators, "uncontrolled immigration (...) threatens our freedom, our security, full employment, the beauty of our landscapes and ultimately our prosperity."

At the time of this popular initiative, and for the past 25 years, Swiss public debate has been dominated by the Swiss People's Party, a conservative, nationalist and populist party that positions itself somewhere between the right and the far right of the political spectrum. The Democratic Union of the Centre is also the party with the most seats in parliament and the most financial resources. It presents itself as the sole defender of Swiss interests and defines "real people" as Swiss citizens without an immigrant background, as opposed to the liberal "elite" who defend universal and European values and foreigners. In order to attract the attention of the media and the citizens, the Swiss People's Party is also adept at sensationalist and alarmist stories and speeches about the state of Switzerland.

2. A structured and inclusive force

The Libero movement was created spontaneously by Swiss students as a reaction to the acceptance of the popular initiative "Against Mass Immigration". As Flavia Kleiner, co-founder and former president of Operation Libero, explained in 2016, "the approval of the February 9th initiative against mass immigration was a shock to me and my friends. We felt alienated. I said to myself: How could this have happened?"

After the blow of the mass immigration referendum, there remained a great disappointment with all the political actors: "They have only taken up the discourse of the SVP on immigration, without saying no, without offering an opposing vision". And with this certainty: "something had to be done".

While the "[Guardian](#)" presents Operation Libero as the main force of opposition to the policies advocated by the UDC (Democratic Union of the Centre), Operation Libero denies being a political party. It does not present candidates to elections; its members are free to join existing



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political parties. On the other hand, the movement does wish to influence electoral campaigns and to participate in public debate by taking a position on the major political and societal issues.

Today, Operation Libero has its own secretariat and 1500 members, mainly young academics and members of the Swiss Parliament. The latter participate in the movement's proper functioning via an annual fee. The movement also mobilizes various political groups and activists opposed to populist anti-immigrant and anti-liberal measures. Today, Operation Libero has over 10,000 donors and 5,000 volunteers.

3. A movement for a multicultural, cosmopolitan, modern and progressive Switzerland

The political movement Operation Libero has a double objective:

- To restructure the Swiss public debate, in particular concerning "Swiss values" by reviving the interest and political participation of all citizens,
- To fuel the country's public debate and defend the vision of a multicultural, cosmopolitan, modern and progressive Switzerland, by opposing certain ideas and parts of the program of the Democratic Union of the Centre.

Operation Libero can be described as social-liberal from an economic point of view and liberal from a societal point of view: "We defend economic and societal liberalism while recognizing the role of the state in setting the framework conditions" (Laura Zimmerman, co-president of Operation Libero).

In general, the main ideas put forward by the movement are the following:

- The defense of an open labor market with the maintenance of the European free movement;
- Liberalization of policies concerning the immigration of foreigners;
- The facilitation of the naturalization procedure;
- The defense of a European policy ensuring cooperation between the European Union and Switzerland;
- The defense of the rights of homosexuals;
- The defense of a policy of redistribution and aid;

In 2021, Operation Libero announced that it would focus its efforts on the following themes:

- A right to liberal citizenship;
- A Switzerland that cooperates with its European neighbors;
- A digital transformation that strengthens democracy and transparency in political life.

4. Real effects on Swiss political life



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Operation Libero has coordinated numerous campaigns in the context of popular initiatives and federal elections. The secretary general of the (Christian Democratic Party), Beatrice Wertli, said of the movement: "The traditional parties are not unhappy with this unexpected support: "Operation Libero has mobilized people who are not all politically active which is precious when you know that the the largest party in Switzerland is the party of abstentionists.

In 2016, Operation Libero launched a campaign against the popular initiative "For the effective removal of criminal foreigners". Thanks to this campaign, which was an important and structuring moment for the Swiss political debate on integration and immigration, the popular initiative was rejected by 59% of the voters. At the end of the campaign, the movement became a recognized and listened-to force in the Swiss political debate.

Among the other actions carried out by the movement are the campaign against the "initiative for self-determination"; the mobilization in favor of the vote for the "facilitated naturalization for the third generation"; and the mobilization in favor of the federal popular initiative "Yes to the abolition of radio and television license fees".

5. An innovative method and discourse online and in the field

- Means and places used:

To carry out its action, Operation Libero carries out its actions on social networks, on university campuses, in the press and during public meetings.

In general, and unlike many political parties and movements, Operation Libero's activists have chosen to address all Swiss citizens, on the internet and via real actions, and not only to a few identified and segmented target groups.

On social networks, the movement counts on numerous activists of all ages and backgrounds ("online fighters") and influencers. The latter use the method of "trolling trolls" ("trolling" being widely used by populist movements and parties) not hesitating to insert themselves into individual public exchanges and to respond to the toxic messages of populists by using facts to dismantle their rhetoric.

On the ground, the movement organizes "physical" events where it does not hesitate to distribute "merch" consisting in tote bags or socks with the effigy of the movement. It also finances campaigns in "mainstream" and popular newspapers (and not only in the big political newspapers) and poster campaigns in the street. Operation Libero also shares its campaign materials on its websites and sends them to people who want to organize physical meetings.

- The rhetoric and method developed:

Operation Libero re-embraces "Swiss values" (respect for institutions, the rule of institutions, the rule of law, individual freedoms, "positive" and open patriotism), appealing to both their emotional and rational selves, to show that the defenders of these values - and therefore of



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Switzerland – are movements like Operation Libero and not the Swiss People's Party, which, on the contrary, undermines the traditional institutions, the rule of law, the freedoms... and therefore the foundations of Switzerland.

Operation Libero proposes a vision of the future rather than complaining about the present. Thus, the movement promotes an optimistic vision of Switzerland in 2050, which it sees as a country with an open and dynamic future and a land of opportunity for all those who live there. This vision is in contrast with the conservative and backward-looking vision promoted by the populist right.

Operation Libero uses simple language, accessible to all, linked to popular themes and attracts people's attention. The movement offers clear explanations of complex political issues, and uses fun images that people can easily read and share. Operation Libero systematically exposes and deconstructs the lies and false claims of populists with facts.

Operation Libero speaks to all of society, not just a segment of citizens, because one of its priorities is to strengthen political participation.

6. Lessons learned from Operation Libero

The Operation Libero movement demonstrates that citizens - even non-politicized ones - can still be mobilized on issues considered complex and dry when given the right political messages, and in the right way.

This is done by:

- Appealing to positive emotions and popular images to make concepts such as freedom, rule of law, and democracy accessible, "likeable," and "enviable" to "ordinary" citizens.
- To insert the concepts of "freedom" and the "rule of law" into the discussions and exchanges that take place in the places of "conviviality" and daily life of citizens (i.e. cafés, bars, etc.)
- Shamelessly assert that being patriotic and defending the values of one's country should not be reserved for populists,
- Use the same weapons of populists by emptying them of their toxic and negative content,
- Invest in research and work daily to continue to innovate and design the right messages and images that oppose populist rhetoric and engage the public,
- Combine online and on-the-ground actions.