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CASE STUDY

EUPopLink Country report - Switzerland

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved, 1 approved with reservations]

Dominique Ursprung, Peter Schwendner

School of Management and Law, ZHAW Zürcher Hochschule fur Angewandte Wissenschaften, Winterthur, Zurich, 8401, Switzerland

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Abstract

This case study examines the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism in Switzerland, a non-EU country that is nevertheless deeply integrated into the European economic and legal order through a dense network of bilateral agreements. It asks how political actors connect "Europe" to broader narratives about popular sovereignty, migration, neutrality, and distrust of elites. The study maps the main political actors in the Swiss debate and analyses the narratives through which European integration is politicised. The findings show that the populism–Euroscepticism nexus in Switzerland is strongest where opposition to closer ties with the EU is framed as resistance to elite-driven constraints on direct democracy, national self-government, and border control. This linkage is most visible on the populist radical right, particularly in the discourse of the Swiss People's Party, but related concerns also appear among other political and societal actors, albeit without the same anti-elite intensity. The Swiss case further shows that Euroscepticism is not reducible to simple opposition to the EU: in a country outside the Union, it is often expressed through contestation over specific institutional arrangements, especially free movement of persons, dispute-settlement mechanisms, and foreign-policy coordination. The study argues that Switzerland illustrates a contingent and selective relationship between populism and Euroscepticism, shaped by direct democracy, a consensus-oriented political system, and the country's unusual position of high functional integration without EU membership.

Plain Language summary

Why Switzerland matters: Switzerland is not a member of the European Union, but it is closely tied to the EU through many bilateral agreements. This makes Switzerland a useful case for understanding how political conflict about "Europe" can develop even outside the EU itself.

What this study looks at: This case study examines how Swiss political

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Approval Status ? ✓

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1. **Alexander Wuttke**, Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, Munich, Germany

2. **Sorina Soare**, University of Florence, Firenze, Italy

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

actors connect criticism of Europe to broader populist themes such as popular sovereignty, distrust of elites, immigration, and Swiss neutrality. It focuses especially on the ways these themes are used in public debate about Switzerland's relationship with the EU.

What we find: In Switzerland, the link between populism and Euroscepticism is real, but it is not automatic. The strongest example comes from the Swiss People's Party, which often presents closer ties with the EU as a threat to democratic self-rule, border control, and legal independence. Other actors are more cautious: some support close economic cooperation with the EU, while still worrying about wage protection, constitutional autonomy, or the political consequences of migration.

Why this matters: The Swiss case shows that Europe can become a powerful symbol in domestic politics even where EU membership is not on the agenda. It also shows that Euroscepticism can take different forms: sometimes it is driven by anti-elite rhetoric, sometimes by economic concerns, and sometimes by debates about neutrality or national decision-making.

What the broader lesson is: Switzerland illustrates that the relationship between populism and Euroscepticism is selective and strategic rather than fixed. A country can be deeply integrated with Europe and still remain politically divided over what that integration means.

Keywords
populism, eurosceptism, Switzerland

This article is included in the COST Actions gateway.

This article is included in the Linking Euroscepticism and Populism (EUPopLink) collection.

Corresponding author: Dominique Ursprung (ursp@zhaw.ch)

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Introduction

This study contributes to the EUPopLink COST Action (Andreadis & Vasilopoulou, 2026) following the EUPopLink Theoretical Framework and guidelines (Lorimer et al., 2026). Switzerland is widely known for its longstanding policy of neutrality and its non-membership in the European Union (EU). Less widely appreciated is that the Swiss electorate also rejected participation in the European Economic Area (EEA) in a closely contested referendum at the end of 1992, decided by a margin of 50.34% and marked by turnout of 78.74% (Federal Statistical Office, 2025). The events surrounding that vote, including a polarized campaign and the Swiss governments hastily submitted application to join the EU (then the European Communities, EC) during the EEA debate triggered enduring scepticism regarding Switzerland's European policy. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) fuelled this mistrust by claiming that parts of the political elite were pursuing EU membership as an ultimate objective even without a clear popular mandate, reinforcing perceptions of excessive accommodation toward Brussels. More than three decades later, 1992 remains a key reference point in the public discourse on Switzerland–EU relations, particularly among older generations who experienced the referendum firsthand (Freiburghaus, 2015).

Since 1992, Swiss European policy has evolved into an architecture of more than 120 bilateral agreements, some of which have been contested in referendums. Switzerland has held more than 13 major Europe-related votes, most producing pro-European outcomes, including approval of Schengen/Dublin (2005), the expansion of free movement of persons to new EU member states (2005, 2009), and two large packages of sectoral treaties: Bilateral Agreements I (67.2% in 2000) and Bilateral Agreements II (54.6% in 2004). Although Switzerland remains outside the EU, it is nevertheless deeply embedded in European economic and legal structures. Trade in goods is particularly dense with neighbouring border regions in Germany (Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria), France (Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes and Bourgogne-Franche-Comté), Italy (Lombardy and Piedmont), and Austria (Tyrol and Vorarlberg) (FDFA, 2026).

A notable exception to this trajectory was the SVP-led "initiative against mass immigration", which indirectly challenged free movement of persons (part of Bilateral Agreements I) and narrowly passed in 2014 with 50.3% support (FDJP, 2014). The outcome was widely interpreted as a vote of non-confidence in the direction of European policy and as evidence of a gap between elite preferences and public concerns about the consequences of integration. These concerns have been sharpened by demographic and labour-market developments: Switzerland's permanent population rose from 6.9 million in 1991 to 9 million by the end of 2024 (over +30%). In 2024, about 71% of immigrants came from Europe, with Germany, France, and Italy leading the list, and cross-border commuting has expanded substantially into Geneva, Ticino, and northern and eastern Switzerland. New surveys show that Swiss citizens are largely uncompromising on immigration. More also oppose than support compromises in EU relations (Scherrer, 2025).

In recent years, as Europe-related votes have been less frequent, the debate has become more technical, focusing on the design and implications of newly negotiated frameworks and agreements, and their expected effects on Swiss sovereignty (FDFA, 2025). The latest package, of what has eventually been called the "Bilateral Agreements III", is expected to be debated in Parliament in 2026 and could be put to a popular vote in 2027 or 2028. Switzerland is therefore approaching another period of intense contestation over European policy, which EU-critical actors may use for electoral positioning ahead of the parliament elections in autumn 2027.

Populist political actors

Populist actors have shaped Switzerland's European debate since 1992. The SVP, which gained momentum in the EEA campaign, became the most consistent opponent of an open foreign policy. It combines nationalist and identity-based demands on migration and European policy with anti-establishment rhetoric. The SVP rose from 11.9% in the 1991 National Council election to 26.7% in 2003 and 27.9% in 2023, making it the largest party in the lower house since 2003. This dominance enabled it to secure a second seat in the seven-member Federal Council since 2003, creating a structural tension: the strongest populist voice against rapprochement simultaneously shares responsibility for the conduct of European policy through government representation.

Other right-populist actors exist, generally Eurosceptic, but none has matched the SVP's national weight. In Geneva, the Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG) emerged in 2005 and became a major cantonal force, shaping debates on housing, employment, and cross-border workers (Zulianello, 2020); it also regained seats in the 2023 National Council election. The MCG emphasizes sovereignty and local autonomy and presents itself as neither left nor right, using anti-establishment rhetoric and a "citizens first" framing (Zulianello, 2024). In Ticino, the *Lega dei Ticinesi* formed in 1991 as a right-wing, regionalist protest party. It has influenced cantonal politics and has intermittently held seats in the National Council, though it currently retains only one; it combines regionalist concerns with populist Euroscepticism and opposition to perceived external pressures – especially cross-border labour – while defending local interests (Albertazzi, 2006; Lamour, 2020). While the inflow of EU workers contributed to the appeal of these narratives, the COVID-19 years

highlighted reliance on foreign professionals; yet the MCG and the Genevan SVP reportedly hardened their positions (Yerly, 2022).

Parties in the political centre, "the Center" ("die Mitte") and the Liberals (FDP), tend to rely less on populist narratives, in part because they cultivate a self-image of responsibility for consensus-oriented political culture and stable governance (Meguid, 2005). The Green Liberals (GLP), though not represented in government, are similar in political style, but are among the few parties that clearly advocate for closer ties with the EU irrespective of institutional form, including options such as EEA membership or the Bilateral Agreements III.

Positions on 'Europe' and the populism–Euroscepticism nexus

In Switzerland's Europe debate, Euroscepticism becomes populist when European integration is narrated as elite-driven 'submission' that circumvents popular sovereignty and direct-democratic control. This section therefore focuses on the narratives through which actors connect 'Europe' to sovereignty, migration, neutrality, and institutional trust. Refer to Table 1 for an overview of the main actors.

The populism–Euroscepticism nexus is illustrated by the SVP's framing of EU packages as "colonial" and "unequal treaties" intended to subordinate Switzerland. While opposing closer integration, parts of the SVP maintain informal links with European actors who favour weaker EU integration, such as Hungary's Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. In the media sphere, the weekly newsmagazine Weltwoche, led by former SVP parliamentarian Roger Köppel, has repeatedly provided a platform for official voices from China, Russia, or Turkey to publish government narratives on Europe and Switzerland without visible journalistic contestation or editing. Whether this positioning is driven by business incentives or conviction is difficult to assess; what is clear is its consistent critique of strong Swiss–EU relations.

Most Swiss parties maintain ties with ideologically aligned European political families; the SVP is comparatively less active, with exceptions among prominent current or former members. Köppel, for example, is described as an important pro-Hungary and pro-Russia voice in Switzerland and beyond (Kallioniemi, Pekka and Hammeken, 2024). Given Switzerland's non-EU status, such links often receive limited attention and may be dismissed as networking rather than substantive political coordination.

Swiss scepticism towards the EU is also shaped by material comparisons: The EU's objective of "convergence" is not intuitively attractive from a Swiss perspective, because Switzerland's macroeconomic conditions, wage levels, tax rates, infrastructure, innovation output, democratic agency, and perceived quality of life are seen as superior compared to

Table 1. Actors in Switzerland.

Actor	Classification	Primary Eurosceptic/Populist Narrative
Swiss People's Party (SVP)	Populist Radical Right (PRR)	Frames EU treaties as "colonial/unequal"; opposes "foreign judges" and free movement.
Geneva Citizens' Movement (MCG)	Populist Radical Right (PRR)	Defends "the citizen first" against "distant elites"; focuses on cross-border workers in Geneva.
Lega dei Ticinesi	Populist Radical Right (PRR)	Regionalist protest; opposes external pressures and cross-border workers in Ticino.
Trade Unions (within SP)	Left-Wing Populist (Contextual)	Oppose EU rapprochement that risks lowering Swiss labor market protection standards.
Social Democratic Party (SP)	Mainstream (Shifting)	Traditionally pro-EU, but now more cautious due to union concerns about wage pressure and migration.
Operation Libero	Adversarial/Style	Uses "aggressive/populistic" language to defend openness; represents "privileged academic city people".
ProSuisse	Valence Populist (Candidate)	Focuses on "traditional neutrality" to challenge EU-aligned foreign policy and sanctions.
The Center (Die Mitte)	Mainstream Non-Populist	Avoids populist narratives; prioritizes stability and traditional government responsibility.
The Liberals (FDP)	Mainstream Non-Populist	Emphasizes a "well-functioning, stable government"; criticizes PRR initiatives as "pro-Putin".
Green Liberals (GLP)	Mainstream Pro-European	Clearly advocates for closer EU/EEA ties; non-populist in positioning.

leading EU member states. This supports the argument that there is no need to bind Switzerland more closely to what Eurosceptic actors portray for many years as a "failing" EU, or simply a "flawed intellectual construct" (Tages-Anzeiger, 2002). The economic dimension also intersects with financial flows and monetary policy: Switzerland's private sector does not predominantly reinvest its export surplus with the EU into European assets, favouring domestic assets instead, which reinforces upward pressure on the Swiss franc against the euro. To contain appreciation, the Swiss National Bank holds a substantial foreign asset portfolio, partially offsetting the private sector's foreign investment shortfall but arguably stretching its monetary-policy mandate (Boos, 2023).

Migration is the most salient interface between aggregate gains and perceived distributional costs. A forthcoming initiative proposes that Switzerland's permanent resident population should not exceed ten million before 2050. This approach would effectively end free movement of persons and breach a core treaty of the bilateral framework (Federal Chancellery, 2025). This reflects a recurring pattern: rather than attacking the bilateral package directly, initiatives often target free movement indirectly. The underlying concern is that migration brings economic gains while imposing perceived costs through wage competition and rising living expenses, making free movement the most contested element of the bilateral acquis. SVP rhetoric echoes this continuity, for example when National Councillor Thomas Aeschi stated that his party would "fight such an unequal treaty [the EEA] with all vehemence" (Aeschi, 2021). On the other hand, SVP rhetoric tends to shift across negotiation and referendum phases, alternating between sovereignty, migration, and neutrality frames.

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, neutrality has briefly re-emerged as an additional frame for contesting alignment with Europe. An advocacy group, ProSuisse, seeks to reduce Switzerland's capacity to adopt EU sanctions, for example against Russia, by advocating a stricter understanding of neutrality. Such initiatives are not always framed explicitly as anti-EU but as pro-neutrality; the FDP described this as a "pro-Putin initiative" (FDP, 2025), arguing that it would weaken ties among European partners by limiting foreign-policy coordination. The question if EU-sceptic actors change their narrative in view of recent events, such as US-tariffs or increased geopolitical uncertainty, cannot yet be answered. There is certainly hope from actors who work for closer ties with the EU, that global volatility, including from the US, will bring Switzerland and the EU closer together, but if this more than wishful thinking will only be known from the upcoming popular votes in summer and autumn 2026.

According to government-commissioned assessments, terminating key bilateral agreements - especially free movement of persons - would entail annual losses in the double-digit billions and cumulative effects exceeding CHF 500 billion by 2045 (Federal Council, 13.6.2025; Ecoplan, 2025).

Responses to euroscepticism and consequences

Switzerland lacks a stable pro-EU mainstream. The Social Democrats (SP) were once decisively in favor of EU membership, but their stance has softened as unions concerned about wage pressure have gained influence and oppose rapprochement that could weaken labor-market protections. This shift can be interpreted as a pragmatic adaptation rather than a turn toward ideological rigidity (March, 2012). On the pro-business side, *economiesuisse* was once the dominant voice in Europe-related campaigns and important for the successful votes on Bilateral Agreements I and II; over the past decade it has lost members and influence. A newer, Zurich-based campaign organisation, Operation Libero, has countered SVP-led initiatives with an assertive communication style; while not anchored in an "elite versus people" frame, its confrontational campaigning can resemble populist techniques and often speaks from an urban, highly educated milieu. In that sense it is best described as adversarial: its main objective has been to defeat initiatives perceived as isolating Switzerland from the EU.

Whether the SVP deploys Euroscepticism opportunistically or expresses stable substantive concerns varies over time. When the third package of bilateral negotiations stalled, some party voices complained that a key mobilizing issue was absent. Yet scepticism toward aspects of the EU is not limited to SVP voters; even pro-European circles often share concerns about regulatory complexity, bureaucracy in large member states, or fears of transforming Swiss cities into dense metropolitan centres with a visibly international culture.

Institutional context shapes how these conflicts unfold. Switzerland's political system is defined by strong checks and balances and extensive consultation procedures (Vatter, 2024; Thurnherr, 2017). Former Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr characterised it as a "consultation machine" (Thurnherr, 2023). Because major Europe-policy steps are likely to face referendums, actors pay close attention to prior vote patterns and opinion trends when positioning themselves and when the government calibrates negotiating mandates (GFS Bern, 2021).

Despite this seemingly deep and close cooperation between Switzerland and the EU, this relationship is one of the most controversial issues in Swiss politics. Subject matter experts such as Freiburghaus (2015) argue that the events surrounding the 1992 vote caused a trauma that has had a lasting impact on the perception of how the Swiss elite tries to manage this issue. Further mistrust was created when the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and its European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) use the same blue flag with the twelve gold stars. In practice, this means that the EU, the EEA, the Council of Europe and its ECHR are often and easily portrayed as one and the same organization, representing a "bureaucratic European monster" that wants to interfere with Swiss sovereignty, direct democracy and conservative fiscal policies. Also, the European Court of Justice (ECJ) is getting framed as "foreign judges", not as a neutral and independent dispute resolution mechanism of the bilateral relationship. A notable exception is the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), which is not seen as part of these overarching European institutions, but rather as an agile intergovernmental instrument of foreign economic policy without a political dimension.

The general attitude towards the EU is reflected in regular votes, whether in referendums or popular initiatives, or in surveys on issues that are not currently up for a vote. Because major Europe-policy steps are likely to face referendums, actors pay close attention to prior vote patterns and opinion trends when positioning themselves and when the government calibrates negotiating mandates. Surveys show for instance consistently, that joining the EEA would find a majority in the population, however there are no political forces (except for the GLP) that advocate for this path (GFS Bern, 2021).

The cautiousness described above in proposing steps towards closer cooperation with the EU and the lack of confidence since 1992 that the government, i.e., the political elite, is actually doing what the population expects of it, has led to an ambivalent relationship between Switzerland and its most important trading partner, the EU. The accusation of a "secret elite plan" to let Switzerland join the EU is not completely unfounded: there was indeed a very controversial decision in an early morning ad hoc meeting of the government to hand in an application to join the EU while the population was in the middle of the discussions around the vote for or against joining the EEA scheduled a few months later (Ursprung & Schweizer, 2015). This scandal has since poisoned the debates – at least in this generation: you cannot trust the political elite with EU projects since they simply aim at achieving EU membership sooner or later. From a legal perspective, such a fear is unfounded since the Swiss constitution requires a compulsory popular vote if Switzerland was to join an international organisation with the legal nature of the EU. Nonetheless, the narrative of a hidden agenda by parts of the elite remains a recurring scheme by those political groups who oppose closer political ties with the EU. Whoever speaks out for a rapprochement is called an "EU-Turbo", i.e., someone that has EU membership for Switzerland as part of his hidden agenda. On one hand this claim is, as just shown, not entirely unfounded given the events in 1992, at the same time, even legal scholars are divided in their evaluation on the impact of current Swiss-EU projects in terms of its impact on Swiss sovereignty.

Short conclusion

Public attitudes in Switzerland towards European integration are rather stable and characterised through two main views: On the one hand there is scepticism against agreements that would lead to a loss of decision-making agency within the decentralised Swiss system of direct democracy. On the other hand, there are concerns about economic integration in the European market and the question how and at what price the current level of integration can be protected or even enhanced. While a populistic narrative with a focus on mistrust against the government and its allegedly untransparent pro-EU agenda exists, and also achieved some success with popular initiatives against the free movement of people (for instance in 2014 with the initiative against mass immigration), there remains a broad majority of the population that votes for stable and close ties with Switzerland's largest trading partner, the EU. It can even be argued that Switzerland succeeded in building and maintaining very stable economic ties with the EU and the European single market over the last three decades – and this despite populist voices for less European integration. Many populist movements are stopped by the slow political system that is consensus oriented and does not allow fast changes. The members of the executive are for instance not selected via a popular vote, but rather by both chambers of parliament. In such a setting, populist or extreme positions will not be a winning strategy to be elected by peers in the parliament. And even if somewhat populist politicians are elected to the executive, as it already happened, this one person is on equal footing with the other six members of this body. They all have to constantly convince others to form majorities within the government, otherwise they risk being isolated and become a lame duck within the executive. This constant struggle to convince other political forces is what ideally leads to solid compromises with outcomes that reflect also a majority view within the Swiss population.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability

No data associated with this article.

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✓ **Sorina Soare**
University of Florence, Firenze, Italy

A very interesting and solid text. The argument is clear, and the discussion successfully captures the complexity of the Swiss context. I only have a few relatively minor suggestions that could further strengthen the manuscript.
In the introduction, it may be useful to add a sentence or two on the most recent referendum initiative proposing a population cap. This initiative is important because it illustrates how challenges to free movement are often framed indirectly, in this case through demographic concerns, rather than through explicit opposition to bilateral agreements. It also highlights that, if implemented, Switzerland could face the termination of international agreements linked to free movement, including key elements of the bilateral framework with the EU.
A second point concerns Table 1 and the explicit application of the theoretical framework developed in the project. While the table is very clear and useful, I would suggest commenting in a little bit more detail (with a couple of sentences no more) on how the narratives of Eurosceptic actors, particularly the SVP, evolve over time. The text already notes that the SVP may deploy Euroscepticism opportunistically, but I think this temporal variation could be made more explicit throughout the discussion. The examples provided later in the chapter suggest that the emphasis shifts between sovereignty, migration, neutrality, and economic concerns depending on the political context and the specific referendum or negotiation phase. Clarifying this dynamic aspect would strengthen the analysis.
More generally, this section contains many interesting observations, but the organizing logic is not always entirely clear. The discussion moves between political actors, media actors, migration, economic arguments, neutrality, and international networks. One possibility would be to structure these elements more systematically around broader themes. I think this would make it easier for readers to see how the different dimensions of Swiss Euroscepticism relate to one another.
A similar observation applies to the final substantive section. The content is interesting and relevant, but the discussion moves from parties to institutional constraints, and from public opinion to historical legacies. I would suggest distinguishing more clearly between the supply side and the demand side, while also incorporating contextual factors such as direct democracy, consultation mechanisms, and historical developments. This would make it easier to distinguish between stable structural factors and more context-dependent political strategies.

The conclusions work well. One possible refinement would be to distinguish more clearly between demand-side drivers of Euroscepticism and supply-side adaptations by political actors (strategic framing, issue emphasis, and campaign narratives). This distinction would help clarify the extent to which Eurosceptic discourse reflects stable societal preferences as opposed to context-dependent political mobilization.

Is the background of the case's history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Populism, euroscepticism, framing, illiberalism

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard.

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Alexander Wuttke
Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, Munich, Germany

The case study addresses an important and under-examined case: a highly Europe-integrated non-EU country in which Euroscepticism is mediated through direct democracy, sovereignty claims, migration politics, and neutrality. This case selection is original and insightful.
The manuscript's main strength is contextual expertise. The manuscript offers a useful mapping of

relevant Swiss actors, especially the SVP, MCG, Lega dei Ticinesi, trade unions, Operation Libero, and mainstream parties, and it convincingly shows that Swiss Euroscepticism is selective rather than reducible to simple anti-EU opposition.

The study is largely descriptive and essayistic, with limited methodological transparency, unclear case-study design, and insufficient operationalisation of key concepts such as populism, Euroscepticism, valence populism, and adversarial style. Several claims are plausible but insufficiently evidenced, including assessments of media actors, elite strategies, public opinion, and economic superiority narratives. This is evident in a lack of citations, which should be revised in a future version of this manuscript. Every knowledge claim must be backed up by references, including knowledge claims like: “In the media sphere, the weekly newsmagazine Weltwoche, led by former SVP parliamentarian Roger Köppel, has repeatedly provided a platform for official voices from China, Russia, or Turkey to publish government narratives on Europe and Switzerland without visible journalistic contestation or editing “. Dozens of references for such knowledge claims are missing.

I would not recommend acceptance without revision. My recommendation is accept with reservations / minor-to-moderate revisions. The case is relevant and potentially valuable for the collection, but the manuscript should be revised to strengthen conceptual precision, methodological transparency, evidentiary support, and analytical structure before it can meet the standards expected of an academic case study.

Is the background of the case’s history and progression described in sufficient detail?
Yes

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Is the case presented with sufficient detail to be useful for teaching or other practitioners?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Populism, public opinion

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.