

## Episode 75: Swiss Identity

### Summary

Our guest Yassin talks about the development of Swiss identity despite the language divides that exist in the country. He discusses direct democracy and differences between French-speaking Switzerland and France.

### Transcript

Nick: Today I'm talking once again with my friend Yassin, and last time we talked about Swiss languages and you told us a lot of really interesting things. And now I want to move on to something similar, but equally interesting, which is Swiss identity. And because you have these four languages, it's very interesting to see how a national identity can be formed. And so you would say, or I would say, and I'm sure you would too, that you're quite a patriotic<sup>1</sup> Swiss person?

Yassin: Yes, that's quite true, yeah.

Nick: And so, if you have these different types of people, you know, French speakers, German speakers ... what is it that brings them all together in ... to make a Swiss person?

Yassin: Well, you know, I think that's actually a really interesting question, 'cause, uhh, for a lot of people who aren't from Switzerland, uhh, it's kind of a mystery to them. You know, what is Swiss identity? What makes us Swiss, right? And, you know, in a way we don't have a single identity, right? Uhh, so as you know, Switzerland is a federal country, officially it's a confederation. And so every state in Switzerland, called cantons, technically they have their own parliament, their own government. Like Geneva, for example, is a republic. It's the republic and canton of Geneva. We have our own national anthem here, we used to have our own local dialects. A few words have, you know, stayed alive. So I think, uhh, first and foremost<sup>2</sup> when you're Swiss, you are from your communal canton. So, for example, I'm first and foremost a *Bündner*, which is someone from Graubünden. Uhh, however, we have a few values which unify us, right? So the languages, which in some countries seem like such an important aspect of identity, here we understand it's only one aspect, not necessarily the most important one. So I think

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<sup>1</sup> patriotic: someone who is very proud of their country

<sup>2</sup> first and foremost: above all, before anything else

one ... probably the number one aspect is we're all very proud of the way our politics work, and namely<sup>3</sup> direct democracy.

Nick: OK, and so a couple of things that are really interesting already, is that even though you've lived in Geneva basically your whole life?

Yassin: Uhh, yes, that's actually true, yeah.

Nick: You consider yourself, in terms of cantons, to be from Graubünden where your mother is from?

Yassin: Yes, yes, that's true. Umm, well, so here when you're born, on your passport, you have a *lieu d'origine* in French, which is, so, yeah, your place of origin. And it's always your mother's, right, uhh, although it could be your father's, I'm not sure. Though in my case he's Moroccan, so I didn't have that option. But because she's from Graubünden, on my passport it says I am, you know, *Grisons* in French or *Bündner* in German. And, uhh, therefore I live in Geneva, I've lived in Geneva my whole life, but I actually have a residency permit for confederates, right, so I have a little booklet which says, you know, 'Yep, I'm established here, this is where I live etc,' but I actually do not have Genevan nationality, if you will<sup>4</sup>.

Nick: OK, that's very interesting.

Yassin: So when I got married, I, uhh, I had to ask for, uhh, official documents from Graubünden, right, there was nothing here for me. I had to send a bunch of<sup>5</sup> official documents to Graubünden as well to validate the marriage. So, yeah, it's interesting.

Nick: Yeah, so it's fascinating that on the one hand, it's very localised like you've been saying, but then the other thing you mentioned was that if you're talking about national pride, now you're looking at federal, nation-wide institutions, like your direct democracy. So how does the direct democracy work? 'Cause it's quite a famous system, but what's it all about?

Yassin: Yeah, I think it's honestly the greatest thing about Switzerland. I think it's why I'm patriotic, uhh, and it's so sad that so few people know about it. Umm, so the way it works is, when you're eighteen, you have the right to vote. But you also have the right to try and get laws passed. What I mean by that is that you can try to start an initiative. It's called, at least, *initiative* in French. Say you want to change the constitution. So you want to add a law or change a law. Uhh, if you get a hundred thousand signatures nation-wide, so at the federal level, then the whole country is basically forced to vote on this issue, right? Uhh, if it's at the cantonal

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<sup>3</sup> namely: in particular, more specifically

<sup>4</sup> if you will (idiom): to put it that way (used when you might not be using the correct or most appropriate term, which in this case is 'nationality' to refer to Geneva, which is not really a nation).

<sup>5</sup> a bunch of: a lot of. See also: Episode 59: The Road to Livingstonia.

level, then I think it's ten thousand people who need to sign, uhh, but if they do, then again, the whole canton has to vote. And at the communal level, uhh, communes would be the equivalent of, uhh, perhaps, uhh, I don't know actually what you would consider them in other countries, but it's smaller than a state, right? A borough<sup>6</sup>, if you will. Umm, there you need to have a thousand signatures. So, yeah, if you get a thousand signatures, then the whole commune has to vote. Yeah, so, umm, and the other thing is, so every few months, you know, you get lots of these, uhh, initiatives, but also the parliament, uhh, gets ... wants to pass a few laws. And for certain laws, you need to have the approval of the Swiss people. So every few months, you get, uhh, through the mail, umm, a letter with different items you need to vote on, different laws that, you know, need to be either changed or put in place. And, yeah, you basically just vote, uhh, you know, yes or no, you send back by mail or you can go to the voting office, uhh, on the Sunday. And, yeah, it's, uhh, that's direct democracy, right? Everybody gets to vote on laws. It's not just the parliament, like in most countries, or all countries, but, uhh, the people.

Nick: No, it's good, it's very interesting. And you see, it's very ... people are very active in the whole process. Whenever there's a vote coming up, there's a lot of banners<sup>7</sup>, there's a lot of people, uhh, trying to encourage people to vote, to vote yes, to vote no, depending on what the particular initiative is. Umm, so, another thing I wanted to ask you. Let's ... I know you're a tennis fan.

Yassin: Yes!

Nick: So we have at the moment two great Swiss tennis players, Roger Federer and Stan Wawrinka. And Federer's from Basel, so he's from the German-speaking part of Switzerland.

Yassin: Yes.

Nick: And Wawrinka's from the Valais somewhere or from Vaud?

Yassin: No, he's actually from Vaud. Yeah, from Vaud.

Nick: OK, so he's from French-speaking Switzerland?

Yassin: Yes.

Nick: So, as a ... even though your situation's complicated because you're sort of half from one side and half from the other side. But do you think, for example, that people from French-speaking Switzerland are more likely to support Wawrinka because he's a French speaker as well, even though Federer does speak French. Is there that as well?

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<sup>6</sup> borough: a municipality that's smaller than a city

<sup>7</sup> banners: signs (often political in nature)

Yassin: Yeah, you definitely get, you know, local identities and like what we call the *Romandie*, which is the French-speaking region. And so, you know, obviously people, you know, are really proud that a *Romand* was doing so well. Umm, so there is, you know, I think in every country you get that, though, in every country, right? Like you're Australian, I'm sure in Australia ... where are you from again actually in Australia?

Nick: Uhh, Sydney.

Yassin: Sydney, right. I'm sure, you know, people from Sydney, they feel proud that they're from Sydney and there's kind of a rivalry going on with Melbourne, for example.

Nick: Yep, for sure. For sure.

Yassin: So, umm, you know, it's the same here. You get rivalries between Geneva and Lausanne, between, I don't know, maybe between, umm ... in Ticino it's between Lugano and, uhh, Bellinzona or Locarno. So you definitely get that also between the linguistic regions. You know, we love to hate each other.

Nick: And so if you look at a French-speaking Swiss person compared to a person from France, what do you think the differences are there in kind of national identities of those people?

Yassin: Oh, well, I mean, that's an interesting question. I guess, you know, the history of the two countries is so different. Umm...

Nick: But I think, for example, that outsiders might go, 'OK, you more or less, you speak French, you more or less look like a French person, you're basically a French person.'

Yassin: Right, right.

Nick: But then the Swiss are very proud of being Swiss and not French, or the German-speaking Swiss not German etc.

Yassin: Yes, that's true.

Nick: So what separates you from a Frenchman?

Yassin: Well, I mean, you know, like to think that we're a bit less arrogant, but that's not always true. We can be very smug<sup>8</sup> actually in Switzerland, 'cause, you know, we are a successful country, and that tends to breed<sup>9</sup> a bit of smugness. But, you know, I like to joke about French people and all, but actually, you know, they're

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<sup>8</sup> smug: acting superior

<sup>9</sup> to breed: to create, to generate, to result in

good neighbours overall. In Geneva, though, we do like to hate on the French, you know, it's all part of the friendly rivalry. But what makes us very different I would say is simply ... umm, I mean Swiss people, you know, because we're used to living in a country that's multi-lingual, and where we're a minority, at least for the French speakers, we're a minority language. I think, you know, we're quite used to the idea that, you know, we have to learn foreign languages, we have to, uhh, you know, learn a bit more, I guess, about, you know, foreign cultures and the way things work. We also try to cooperate on a, you know, governmental level. Umm, people like to compromise<sup>10</sup> here, even in the workplace. Whereas I think in France, people tend to be - this is, again, a generalisation - umm, they tend to be a bit more politically divided, uhh, they tend to be, pfff, I mean, we like to say that they're a bit, you know, a bit arrogant sometimes. But that's just because, you know, when you are this minority like we are, the French do sometimes make fun of you, you know, for your accent, for the funny way you speak, uhh, the same way they make fun of Belgians, right? Umm, so, yeah, but fundamentally, we're all Europeans, you know, we're not that different.

Nick: But if you're a smaller polity like you said, then it helps to unify internally within your smaller group.

Yassin: Yeah.

Nick: Whereas a large country like France has divisions and things like that.

Yassin: Yeah, well, France, it's so centralised, right? That's the big thing. France is a very centralised country, you know. Paris is the centre of the world, right? Whereas no Swiss person will ever think that Bern is the centre of the world, or Geneva, right? We just don't have that illusion. But that being said, you know, I know plenty of lovely French people - usually not from Paris - but, uhh, who are a lot like the Swiss, you know. They say people from Brittany will have a very proud, local Breton culture and identity, so, yeah.

Nick: Alright, so thank you very much.

Yassin: You're welcome.

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<sup>10</sup> to compromise: to find solutions by making concessions

## Comprehension Questions

1. What does Yassin think is the number one thing that brings Swiss people together to create a national identity?
2. Why doesn't Yassin belong to the canton of Geneva despite living there his whole life?
3. In general, what does Yassin think of France and French people?

## Exercises

*Use the words and expressions in the footnotes of the transcript to fill in the gaps.*

1. Manhattan is the most famous \_\_\_\_\_ of New York. The other four are Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Staten Island.
2. He considers himself \_\_\_\_\_ to be a Muslim, and his national identity as an Iraqi is secondary.
3. I can't stand him because he's so \_\_\_\_\_. He thinks he's so much better than everybody else.
4. We have been negotiating for weeks but the other side is simply not willing \_\_\_\_\_. Unless they make a few concessions, I don't think a deal will be made.
5. She's the best musician at the school, the pianist-in-chief, \_\_\_\_\_.
6. He was offered a job in Russia but he turned it down because he didn't think he'd be comfortable there for a few reasons and one in particular, \_\_\_\_\_ that he didn't speak Russian.
7. She's not very \_\_\_\_\_, which is one of the reasons that she's happy to live abroad. She doesn't miss home at all.
8. He has a long flight coming up so he downloaded \_\_\_\_\_ podcasts to give him a lot of listening material for the plane.
9. There was a big protest in the city yesterday with lots of people marching and holding up \_\_\_\_\_ protesting the government's decision.
10. Being at war against other countries tends \_\_\_\_\_ patriotism in people, which is one of the reasons why Americans are often very patriotic.

## Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with a partner or in the [English in 10 Minutes Listeners group on Facebook](#):

1. Yassin says that the biggest marker of identity in Switzerland is probably the country's political system. What do you think is the biggest marker of identity in your country?
2. What do you think about the direct democracy system that Yassin described? Would you like to see this system in your country?
3. Does your country have a good relationship with its neighbours? Is there a friendly rivalry like Yassin described with Switzerland and France?

## Answers

### Comprehension Questions

1. The fact that Swiss people are all proud of their direct democracy.
2. He belongs to the canton of Graubünden because that's where his mother was originally from.
3. He says that France is a good neighbour and that the French and Swiss are pretty similar in the end, despite some differences.

### Exercises

1. borough
2. first and foremost
3. smug
4. to compromise
5. if you will
6. namely
7. patriotic
8. a bunch of
9. banners
10. to breed