Abstract

The author guides us expertly through the thickets of referendums (no fewer than fourteen from 1972) in which Swiss citizens have been given the opportunity to pass judgment on the European question. Most importantly, this volume explains why the Swiss still oppose joining the European Union. It examines the thorny questions of identity, reservations on policy matters (preserving neutrality, direct democracy and Swiss style federalism), not to mention doubts regarding the economy. Paradoxically, the closer Switzerland gets to the EU through bilateral agreements, the more distant prospects of joining the EU seem to become. This is the conundrum at the heart of the relationship between the Swiss Confederation and the European Union which is expertly explored in this volume.

Reference

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This volume seeks to give an overview of relations between Switzerland and the European Union (EU). This relationship has been the subject of many books in various languages but many of these have been written from an overtly political viewpoint while others have been collective works or have been very specialized studies, and thus less approachable for the average reader.

In publishing this book, we hope to present the wider public with a volume that brings together research and expert analysis from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Swiss-EU relations can seem a little off-putting at first sight. There is a real danger of not seeing the wood for the trees, what with agreements and referendums a-plenty. A very specialized study can leave the reader none the wiser as he or she sinks slowly under the great weight of detail presented.

There can also be a certain feeling of “déjà vu” when it comes to Swiss-EU relations. After all, history seems to have repeated itself again and again over the last sixty years. A majority of Swiss voters has consistently come out against European Union membership and yet Switzerland has never been content to sit on the side-lines of Europe. If we had to sum up the situation in a concise phrase, we might say “Membership unlikely, marginalization impossible”. The curious thing is that it expresses a truth that we seem to re-discover on a regular basis; each time we are as surprised as if it were our first.

Switzerland and its relationship with the EU are both surprising and paradoxical in equal measure. They represent a real conundrum: Switzerland is the only major European country to have regularly declined EU membership. A sparsely populated and far-flung land? Not Switzerland. With over 7 million inhabitants, almost half the member states of the EU are less populous than the Swiss Confederation. Its rejection of the EU would be less surprising if were somewhat geographically isolated, like Norway, or an island, like Iceland. But of course, it is neither. Seen from almost any point of view – cultural, economic, political, scientific or even demographic – Switzerland is totally interdependent with its European neighbours.
Switzerland - European Union. An Impossible Membership?

Let us not forget that Switzerland shares common borders with Germany, Italy and France, three of the founding members of the EU and is surrounded by what might be considered the very homeland of the European project.

Nor does the Swiss Confederation stand in splendid isolation against all around it. It brings together the languages, cultures, traditions and religions of these three countries and makes them its own.

Demographically, the country is also mixed, as the traffic of 700,000 people crossing its borders on a daily basis attests. Close to 870,000 EU citizens live in Switzerland and some 380,000 Swiss citizens reside in the EU.

Switzerland’s political traditions mark it as a European country par excellence. It enjoys a longstanding and rich tradition of parliamentary regimes. Its political parties resemble those of its neighboring states while its intellectual movements and the topical issues discussed place it very much in the mainstream of Western thought.

Lastly, in economic terms, Switzerland has always been profoundly integrated in the EU. Approximately 60% of Swiss exports go to and close to 80% of its imports come from the Community market. About 43% of Switzerland’s direct investments are in EU member states. In 2008, Swiss enterprises employed more than 850,000 people from EU countries.

The EU, moreover, is an important trading partner for Switzerland. In terms of exports, Switzerland’s balance of payments account with the EU is the second largest after the United States but still far bigger than that of Russia, China, or Japan.¹

One might imagine that all these elements would make an irrefutable case for Switzerland to join the European Union as a full-fledged member. But Switzerland shows no signs of taking this road. The Swiss have always preferred intermediary solutions, a third path between accession and marginalization.

The EU and the Swiss Confederation have, in fact, shown great ingenuity with concepts such as the free-trade area and the European economic area, not to mention exploring all the possibilities of bilateral agreements to achieve the desired effect.

¹ On the other hand, in terms of imports, Switzerland is the EU’s 6th most important trading partner after the US, China, Russia, Japan and Norway. Trade figures in 2007 show € 76.7 billion in imports and € 92.8 billion in exports. Switzerland is also a very important partner of the EU for trade in services. In 2006 the EU’s export totalled € 52.6 billion, imports from Switzerland € 37.4 billion. See European Commission, Bilateral Trade Relations, 2008. http://ec.europa.eu/trade/issues/bilateral/data.htm.

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Although such approaches have been successful, it should be recalled that these ingenious mechanisms have never been uncontroversial and that they have, on every occasion, triggered intense debate in Switzerland.

The history of the Swiss Confederation’s European policy will not come to a close with a second series of bilateral agreements. Some twenty new areas may still be the subject of negotiation over the next few years.

What is particularly interesting in Switzerland’s policy is its conceptual innovations. We shall endeavor to show here the wealth of nuance included in the framework agreement, the customs union and the Swiss-style “pick ‘n’ choose accession”. This book also aims to explain why the Swiss are reluctant to join the EU. We will adopt a dialectic approach to explain why Swiss reluctance is rooted in a national sense of identity, as well as political and economic matters.