

New trans-Alpine railway lines : integrating Switzerland in the European Network

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New trans-Alpine railway lines

Integrating Switzerland in the European network

The new railway lines across the Alps have as their objective to maintain Switzerland's role as a transit country at the heart of Europe – while at the same time reducing pollution in the Alpine valleys.

The proposal which Swiss voters will be asked to ratify in September aims to promote combined road and rail transport (including transport by rail of trucks and container vehicles). Two new tunnels – one under the St. Gotthard and the other under the Lötschberg – will substantially shorten the main railway lines between the north and the south of Switzerland, and this will increase the attraction of rail transport for both passengers and goods traffic.

New tunnels under the St. Gotthard and the Lötschberg

In order to reach the combined objectives described above, the government (supported by parliament) proposes:

- construction of a new two-track railway line 130 km long between Arth-Goldau, Canton Schwyz, and Lugano, including a base tunnel 50 km long under the St. Gotthard;
- construction of a base tunnel 30 km long under the Lötschberg between Frutigen, Canton Bern, and the Rhone valley in Canton Valais;

- connection of Basle and Geneva to the French TGV high-speed rail network.

These large-scale projects, which will supplement the huge project for im-

Pierre-André Tschanz

proving the Swiss railway infrastructure, known as Rail 2000, which was started some years ago, will take about twenty years and will cost, according to 1991 estimates, about Sfr. 15 billion. Half of this sum will be obtained from excise duties on road vehicle fuel, and half will come from bonds issued on capital markets. These will be reimbursable within 60 years following the start of operation.

Greatly increased speed

The first railway tunnels through the Alps were built about a century ago, between 1870 and 1910. They are all still



in use, but the network is no longer big enough for modern needs. The old tunnels are both too small and too high up in the mountains. The new tunnels being planned are known as base tunnels – the new St. Gotthard will be only just over 500 metres above sea level –

which will mean a substantial time gain for the user. For example, an intercity train which at present requires 5 hours 17 minutes – at best – between Basle and Milan will link the two cities in 3 hours 10 minutes when the new lines are completed.

A test for Switzerland's European policy

The referendum on these new railway lines across the Alps will be the first test for the European policy of the Swiss government. Implementation of this new railway infrastructure is the central point in an agreement on goods transit recently concluded between Switzerland and the European Community. In it Switzerland has promised to triple its capacity for rail transit of goods. But in exchange it may maintain severe restrictions on heavy road transport (weight limited to 28 tonnes; prohibition of traffic at night and on Sundays). A No on September 27 to these new railway lines across the Alps would amount to non-ratification of this transit package, which appears on the face of things to be very favourable to Switzerland. It would also put our country in a very difficult position in European policy terms in the runup to the referendum on Switzerland's participation in the Euro-

Road-on-rail transport is an important component of environmental transport policy, as planned in the new Alpine railway project. (Photo: Keystone)

pean Economic Area which will in all probability be held on December 6.

The project for the new railway lines across the Alps is opposed by ecologists on the one hand and by representatives of automobile and trucking companies on the other. Both lobbies are saying

government should forfeit this revenue and think it unfair that banks and financial institutions should enjoy tax privileges.

Rural property law regulates the legal status of agricultural land. The new legislation, which was approved by parliament last autumn, is aimed mainly at bringing together in one law provisions which are at present spread through several legislative texts and at facilitating the acquisition of agricultural enterprises by people who intend to operate them in their own right. A referendum procedure launched by property owners in French-speaking Switzerland has received the required number of signatures, and therefore the legal text in question has to be put to the vote. Right-wingers are against the law on the ground that it promotes unnecessary government intervention. The government and parliament, together with

farmers' organisations and the left-of-centre parties, recommend a Yes vote.

With the forthcoming revision of the Laws on Parliamentary Business, Indemnities and Infrastructure, it is hoped that parliamentary proceedings will become more efficient and that the federal chambers will take a greater part in foreign policy-making.

Higher indemnities and expense allowances should enable Switzerland's citizens' parliament to continue broadly as before, but with greater efficiency.

However, a referendum committee has been formed to combat these three differing proposals. Its members are of the opinion that revision of the indemnity and infrastructure laws will in the end lead to a professional parliament – but without the real problems being touched on.

PAT/GUA

Forthcoming federal referendums

September 27, 1992

- Federal Resolution on the Construction of Two New trans-Alpine Railway Lines
- Revision of the Federal Law on Stamp Duty
- Revision of the Federal Law on Rural Property Rights
- Revision of the Federal Laws on Parliamentary Business, Indemnities and Infrastructure (three separate subjects)

December 6, 1992

Approval of the EEA treaty (probably)

that the project is much too big – one tunnel would have been quite sufficient – and they criticise the fact that the European Community does not intend to contribute to financing the project. The non-ecological opponents of the scheme also object to the fact that excise dues paid by vehicle owners will be in part used to create the new rail infrastructure. For their part, the ecologists complain that the federal decree which is being voted on does not actually compel goods transporters to use the new railway lines across the Alps.

Most political parties and economic organisations in Switzerland support the project. They do not believe it is Switzerland's role to act as an obstacle to the flow of traffic across Europe. They fully accept the advantages of rail transport as against road transport. And they also think that Switzerland should be integrated into the all-European railway network, as well as participating in the European Economic Area.

Current popular initiatives

Family names initiative
Kurt Klose, P.O. Box 12,
CH-8492 Wila/Zürich

For lower military spending and more peace policies
For prohibition of arms exports
André Daguet, Pavillonweg 3,
P.O. Box, CH-3001 Bern

For a 130 km limit on motorways
For an 80 km limit on roads
outside localities
Bernhard Böli,
Zollweidenstrasse 31,
CH-4142 Münchenstein

A documentary kit on this subject may be obtained from the Federal Transport Office, Bundeshaus, CH-3003 Bern, or from Swiss Railways Head Office, Hochschulstrasse 6, CH-3030 Bern.

Mr./Mrs. Family

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