

European Economic Area : Switzerland says no

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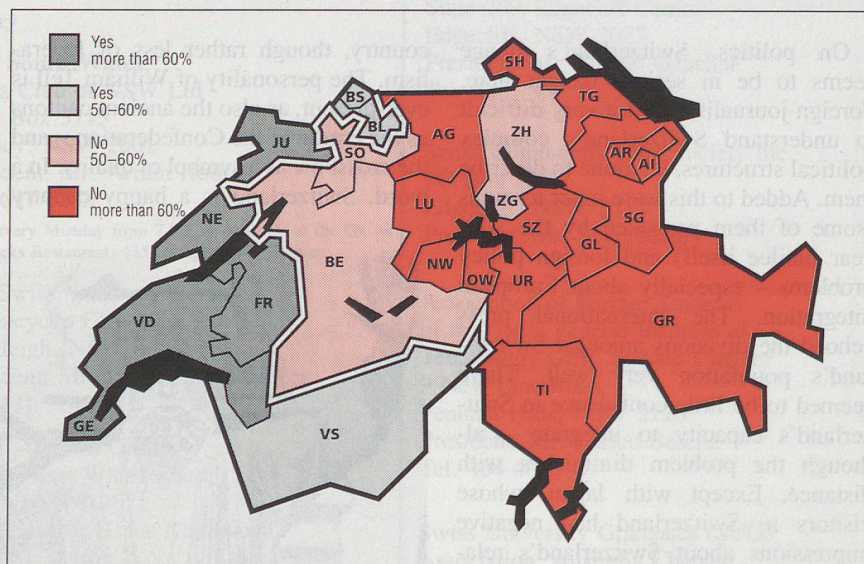
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Switzerland says No



On December 6, 1992, Switzerland – by a double majority of voters and cantons – decided not to join the European Economic Area. The No majority among total voters was very small indeed – just 23 000 out of 3.8 million, the whole amounting to 50.3%. However, only the six French-speaking cantons and the two half cantons of Basle-City and Basle-Rural said Yes – while the rest of German-speaking Switzerland and Italian-speaking Ticino said No.

Unpredictable consequences

As in the case of the Danish No to Maastricht on June 2, 1992, it is impossible to predict all the consequences of the Swiss vote – both for Switzerland itself or for Europe. A European diplomatic conference will be called shortly to decide what happens now to the European Economic Area Treaty. At home the Eurolex programme – adjustment of about 60 laws to European Community legal standards – falls flat. If the European Economic Area comes into being without Switzerland – it cannot now do so as planned on January 1, 1993, to coincide with the Community single market – the 1972 free trade agreement between Switzerland and the European Community will remain in force. The Swiss government intends to keep all its op-

tions open, including membership of the European Community (an application to this effect having been made in May 1992). The government is also thinking about a “revitalisation programme” for the economy to help it face up to possible discrimination from

1993 in the wake of the European single market.

Record voting figures

There was an exceptionally high turnout for the referendum: 78% of registered voters, the highest percentage seen in Switzerland since 1947, when the compulsory old age, survivors and disability insurance scheme was introduced.

The highest proportions of No votes came from central Switzerland (Uri, Schwyz, Upper Unterwalden), while the Yes vote was particularly strong in the French-language cantons (Neuchâtel, Vaud, Geneva, Jura). In the bilingual cantons of Berne, Fribourg and Valais the French-speaking areas voted Yes, while the German-speaking areas said No. This division between French-speakers and the rest of the country was reflected in a gap between town and country in German-speaking Switzerland, where the cities of Zurich, Berne and Basle all came out with Yes majorities.

Pierre-André Tschanz

Commentary

Our first thought goes to French-speaking Switzerland. In the most vital referendum for decades it has been rebuffed. There is a deep ditch between us. It cannot be talked away, and we must do our best to fill it in. This will not be easy. It is the duty of German-speaking Switzerland to show solidarity.

We must all enter into daily dialogue with our French-speakers – especially those of us who voted No. The Federal Council and parliament must also show concern: the worries of French-speaking Switzerland must be taken more seriously, particularly since it has been worst hit by the economic crisis and hoped the EEA would bring improvement. It would be disastrous to work out our future European policy while ignoring the worries of one language area. While the next

steps are being considered it is very important indeed that the French-speakers should be seen and heard.

The second thought is for the more distant future. The people and the cantons have decided to go it alone. This deserves respect – if only because of the difficulties which loom. It is not so much the economic problems; without the EEA the recession will be deeper, but the majority were well aware of this.

The knife which has operated on the body politic will leave a deeper scar. Federal Council, parliament, cantonal governments, political parties, trades unions and much of the private sector have been soundly disavowed as never before. If Switzerland is to continue prosperous after such a deep division more energy than ever will be needed. Will there be enough to produce the necessary consensus?

It is by no means certain yet that the much-praised “revitalisation program-

Press Review

It was with a fair amount of dismay that the December 6 No vote on the European Economic Area by the Swiss people and the cantons was received in the next morning's papers. Like government and parliament, most of the press had recommended a Yes vote, and some papers had even acted as veritable missionaries for a Yes.

Under the title "Switzerland does not know where it is going", Pascal de Garcin explained in the "**Journal de Genève**" how the two armed camps faced each other for this vote:

"Those in favour of a Yes to the European Economic Area see Switzerland as it really is, capable of opening up to the world, able to adjust – but also with some of the rheumatism and prejudice of age.

But those in favour of the No – often with absolute honesty – see Switzerland as they feel it should be or as it once was: equipped with dynamism, creative spirit, originality, readiness for a combat which will allow it to make good against all the other countries, to win through..."

Amongst the "missionaries" of the Yes vote was Jacques Pilet, editor-in-

chief of the "**Nouveau Quotidien**", who had this to say:

"Switzerland must continue on the road which its government opened up last spring with great foresight and courage.

It will take part with its EFTA partners in discussions on full membership of the European Community. And from the outset of these talks it will help to define the way in which the Community develops in the years to come. Our seven ministers are responsible for the country, and they must have the courage to see farther ahead, much farther ahead than the people".

"A dangerous split" is the headline of the "**Corriere del Ticino**", in which Carlo Manzoni writes:

"Two elements stand out in the EEA referendum result: the split between the language groups and the split between the political establishment and the people.

The first of these is the more disturbing. The gap which now exist between the French-speakers and the German and Italian-speakers will certainly leave its marks on a state which has arisen out of the will of various peoples to create unity out of diversity."

The editor-in-chief of the "**Basler Zeitung**", Hans-Peter Platz, had this to say:

"Those in favour of the EEA may console themselves with the thought that time and developments will surely promote Switzerland's approach – and attachment – to a wider Europe marching into a successful future; the No to the EEA will probably be only temporary. But the result of the vote at home will be worse and more immediate than the European effect."

Federal Ballots

March 7, 1993

June 6, 1993

September 26, 1993

November 28, 1993

Subjects not yet decided

"Ways out of the shock" headlined the "**Neue Zürcher Zeitung**", whose editor-in-chief, Hugo Bütler, continued:

"Successful negotiations and victory over the Swiss tendency to despondency and resignation are possible only if after this self-destructive referendum we can reunite at home and establish common aims in matters foreign. The debate about our place in the world and Switzerland's role in a Europe which is already integrated to a large extent has now traversed an important stage. But with the rejection of the EEA Treaty it is by no means definitively over. One thing which has appeared very plainly from the EEA debate is that the federal government took too long to establish a clear intention to join. It was because of this weakness, leading to something in the nature of a bad conscience, that an unfortunate confusion was created between the EEA Treaty and entry into the European Community. An Achilles heel was thus presented to the opponents of European integration. This confusion was finally conjured in the parliamentary debates, but by then it was too late. In addition, economic experts – particularly in German-speaking Switzerland – came out energetically in favour of the EEA very late in the day, stating clearly that it was a continuation of the free trade policies which had always been thought to be in the best interests of the nation."

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me" will succeed in this age of bitter competitive struggle. It will not be quick or easy for us to find the right way forward. We are heading for troubled and uncertain times.

Our third thought is for our European partners. In the future they will not have much reason to meet us halfway when we want something from them. And yet – as always in diplomacy – the door must be left ajar. And this means that the Federal Council should maintain its request for negotiations on European Community membership.

This is the end of the first stage in the great national debate on Europe. The atmosphere is not one of champagne and caviar – most of us are still in pensive mood. But the next stage is not far away – and some of us think it should take quite a different turn.

Roger de Weck, Editor-in-Chief,
Tages-Anzeiger, Zurich

