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Isolation or Integration?

The number of non-EEC states in western Europe is dwindling. Since 1958 the membership total of the Community has doubled: from six to twelve. Although, conversely, membership of the «rival» economic organization, the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), declined, this was only from nine to six member-governments, for Ireland, Greece and Spain were not EFTA members before they joined the EEC. None the less, the EFTA's loss of weights is quite impressive.

In fact, the Free Trade Association never assumed the same importance as the EEC because it was only the latter that followed a global concept of European policy. The EFTA renounced all political ambitions and did not aspire, even in the economic field, to the integration of the economies of its member-governments, but only to free trade in finished products – and this only in the industrial sector (without the inclusion, in the amalgamation process, of agriculture, movement of capital, mobility of labour, and services).

EEC model prevails

All the same, coexistence between the EEC and EFTA during the sixties could still be seen as an equipoise, even if a somewhat asymmetrical one. Real competition then existed between the two organisations: the EEC propounded an ambitious full-integration programme to the Europeans for the configuration of their future; the EFTA, modest but also less problematic and less crisis-prone industrial free trade. It is finally clear, however, that once Spain and Portugal had gained entry into the EEC, the Community had won the day. The EEC model prevailed, and the six left-over states of the EFTA: Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland, have become the exceptions or, in a

word (a description that is by no means unpopular in Switzerland): «special cases».

In earlier centuries, such a development would have triggered fears of encirclement. There is no feeling of this today. The EEC has repudiated all forms of imperialism, and respects, without any ifs or buts, those countries which want to stay outside. Neverthe-

Demonstration in front of the European Parliament in Strassburg for the abolition of all tariff barriers in Europe.



less, two political problems for Switzerland arise out of the new constellation: our country will not be able to prevent all the rest of the world from looking upon the EEC as the political spokesman for all of western Europe. And in Europe itself, Switzerland will have to fight, together with the other non-EEC states, so that the Strasburg Council of Europe – western Europe's only political

forum in which they participate, does not sink into insignificance.

Co-operation instead of competition

Economically, too, Switzerland need have no fear of being overpowered by the EEC. The larger the EEC becomes, the more it substitutes the sincere and almost urgent wish (a quite recent phenomenon, this) for co-operation with the EFTA states, for the old feeling of rivalry. As from 1973, in bilateral agreements with the EFTA member-governments, the Community put industrial free trade into effect; and in the Luxemburg Declaration of 1984 the two groups of states formulated, for the first time, a common goal for western Europe: the creation of a «dynamic European economic area» whose hub and motor shall be the «internal market without frontiers» – the free European

market place which the EEC will have become by 1992.

Beyond free trade

This is the greatest challenge for Switzerland in the new constellation. It means that for the first time we take a step beyond the free trade concept which secured for our European policy a safe and simple framework for thirty years. As long as only finished products

were being exchanged, the economic autonomy of the countries producing them remained fully intact. Although cooperation is now also being sought in other fields – research, protection of the environment, transport, communications, agriculture, energy, the war against unemployment – this certainly does not mean that the infrastructure of the Swiss economy has to be slavishly adapted to developments in the EEC. Yet without a modicum of voluntary or contractually-agreed harmonization, this enhancement of relations will be impossible. To single out just a few examples, competition policy, outlay on environmental protection, road traffic charges, manufacturing norms, need not be identical, but would be com-

patible, with the corresponding Community standards and regulations. Without necessarily being subject to the legal constraints of EEC directives, Switzerland must find ways to establish this compatibility and, in so doing, to safeguard its interests to the full.

New vista needed

Such a task is not completely new for Switzerland but the scope of such harmonization measures is likely to increase in the medium term to the extent that they will no longer be the exceptions, but rather the rule. Our diplomatists would seem to be well prepared for all this, for they have had some thirty years of experience of coping conscientiously with similar tasks. For our administration, however, this new dimen-

sion of Swiss foreign trade integration may well call for some change of mind and practice. But, above all, our Swiss industry will have to develop a new mode of vision. In those Swiss enterprises abroad which have to do with the EEC there is a growing feeling of uneasiness over the fact that the Swiss domestic economy and, mainly, the smaller firms, still seem to have acquired almost no sensitivity for the transformation that has come over the western European world of integration. These are the enterprises which, in a few years' time, risk becoming left behind by the new developments. ●

*Jörg Thalmann
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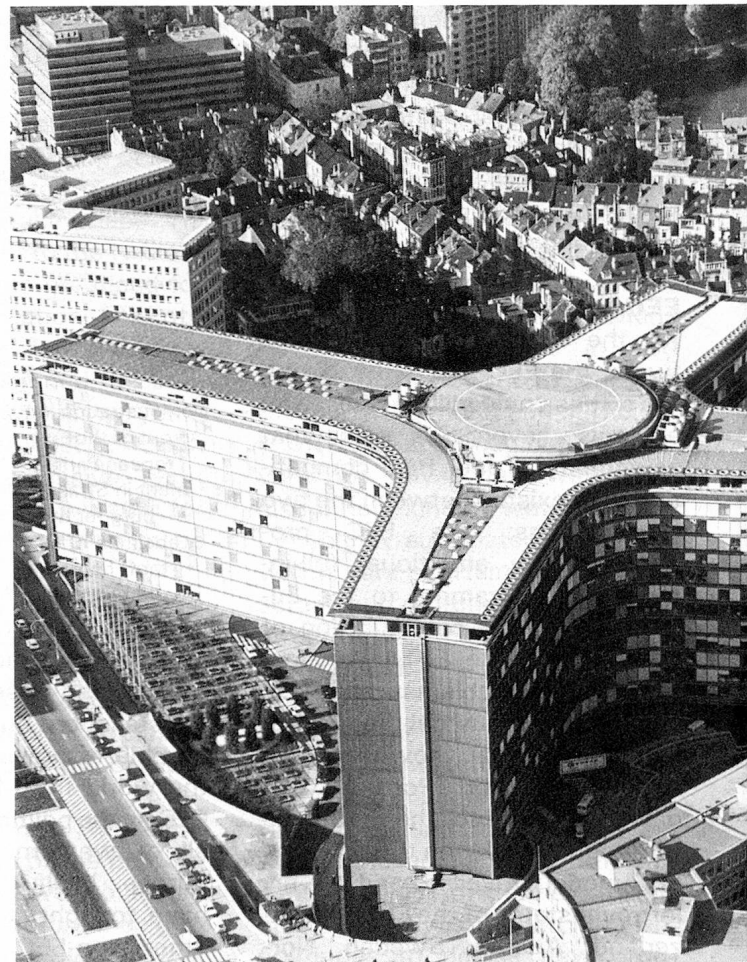
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