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European Free Trade Association (EFTA)

After seventeen countries in Europe had failed to set up a comprehensive free trade zone in 1958, seven of them decided to come together in the European Free Trade Association. The expressed aim of the agreement signed at Stockholm was to break down the trade barriers which separated EFTA from the European Economic Community (EEC).

The agreement to set up EFTA was signed on January 4, 1960, by Austria, Denmark, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Since that time three of EFTA's founder members have left to join the EEC, these being Denmark and the United Kingdom in 1973 and Portugal in 1986.

«Der schweizerische Weg in die europäische Zukunft», together with much other relevant information, may be obtained free of charge from the Integration Office FDFA/FDEA, Information Section, Bundeshaus Ost, CH-3003 Berne.

However, in 1970 Iceland joined EFTA, and Finland – which had had associate status since 1961 – joined in 1986. In May 1991 Liechtenstein also became a full member of the organisation.

Two concepts of integration

The fear of discrimination on the part of the European Community (EC) – which is a customs union with uniform dues imposed upon all outsiders – was not the only thing which brought these seven countries together. As early as the 1950s it had become clear that two entirely different visions of European integration stood over against each other. The first was an enormous project in which economic

integration was to lead inevitably to political integration. The second was a purely trading association which aimed at increasing trade in manufactured goods by scaling down customs and eliminating technical barriers to free trade.

But though the creation of EFTA must be regarded as a reaction to the European Economic Community, it was never intended as a rival to the latter. Today we are in a better position than ever to judge the correctness of the political intentions of the EFTA founders, who in the 1960 Stockholm Agreement expressly stated their wish to eliminate trade barriers with the EEC. This desire for wider European integration was again expressly emphasised at the first joint meeting of EFTA and EC ministers held in April 1984. The European Economic Area (EEA), on which the EC and EFTA finally started to negotiate in June 1990, was something which already existed in the minds of those gathered in Stockholm thirty years before.

Targets reached

During these thirty years of its existence, EFTA has reached the targets which were laid down at its foundation. It has succeeded in establishing a completely free trade zone for manufactured goods, and it has finally fulfilled the function of a bridge between its members and those of the EC. In addition,

EFTA members have used their traditional free market economies to exercise an extremely favourable effect on the liberalisation of world trade by repeatedly insisting on the principles of free trade within GATT (the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) until they got their way. The conclusion of the bilateral free trade agreement between EFTA and the EC in 1972 was also very favourable on two fronts. It was an initial step towards creating a bridge between the two economic integration zones in Western Europe which had always been one of EFTA's main targets. And it also meant that free trade could continue to exist with the two countries which were shortly to leave EFTA and join the EC, Denmark and the United Kingdom.

EFTA today

Today EFTA consists of Austria, Finland, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. Its main task is at present limited to administering the free trade zone which exists between these seven countries. The headquarters of the organisation is in Geneva, where the general secretariat has a staff of about 40. EFTA is an organisation which is not strong in bureaucracy and has a relatively small annual budget of about Sfr. 15 million. In contrast to the EC, EFTA possesses no supra-national authority or institution. The governing body is the EFTA Council. This may be made up either of the permanent representatives of the member-states who are resident in Geneva or of ministers from the seven members. In normal circumstances the permanent representatives meet twice a month, while the ministers come together twice a year. Most decisions are reached by unanimous consent, and the voting procedure intended to reach decisions by majority vote is hardly ever used.

(Source: «Der schweizerische Weg in die europäische Zukunft», published by the Integration Office FDFA/FDEA, Berne).

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