

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 19 (1992)
Heft: 1

Artikel: The EEA : an area without ambition
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907225>

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The EEA

An Area without Ambition

EEA means European Economic Area. Why should this joint venture, whose aim is to integrate the EFTA countries into the European Community single market, be so blandly designated as an "area".

The expression was coined in 1984 when EFTA and the EC took their first steps towards each other. At that time none of those involved had much idea how their target would be achieved, and the name was meant to convey a somewhat vague intention of establishing a common "area" by means of a number of fairly small stages.

Fear as the main motive

The main motive force of the EEA was undoubtedly anxiety in the EFTA countries about the consequences of being left out of the EC single market. The 12 EC states decided some years ago that from the beginning of 1993 all barriers affecting the free movement of persons, goods, capital, services, transport, ideas and information between them were to be abolished. In the absence of the EEA, the single market would mean that a wall of bureaucratic barriers would have been built around the EC. Swiss products, for example, would have been able to cross this wall only after paying discriminatory tariffs. The EEA treaty which has now been concluded between EFTA and the EC means that EFTA products will be given unhindered access to EC markets.

Our civil aviation flag-carrier, Swissair, has experienced just how quickly discrimination can spring into being. When it decided to promote the idea of a common European airspace through its policy of liberalisation, it was boycotted by the EC in an attempt to pressurise Switzerland in the EEA negotiations on the sore subject of Alpine transit. The EC made it clear that the boycott would be lifted at the moment Switzerland gave its definitive assent to the EEA treaty.

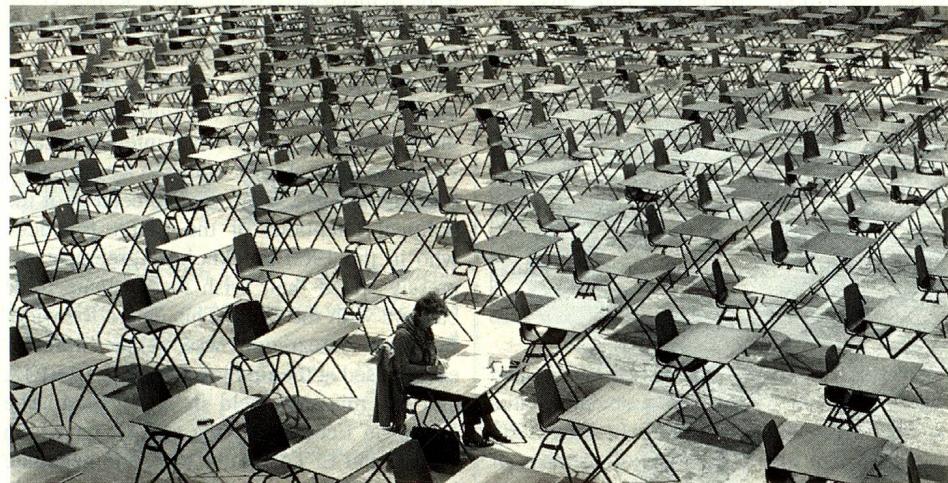
Complying with EC standards

What will be the effect of the treaty allowing the EFTA countries access to the EC? EFTA countries will have to take into their own legal systems the approximately 1,400 standards contained in the directives and enactments which the EC has now established to govern its single market. In most cases this will actually have to take place before January 1, 1993. However, where the change required is too great for internal consumption a two to five year transition period has been allowed. This means, for example, that Switzerland has until 1998 to establish complete freedom

of movement for foreign workers and unrestricted access to land purchase by citizens of EC countries.

Exceptions

The 28 tonne limit for heavy road vehicles is a permanent exception for which Switzerland was able to win acceptance. But why on earth



The main motive force of the EEA is anxiety in the EFTA countries about being left out. (Photo: Keystone)

does EFTA have to adapt to the EC with scarcely any exceptions and not vice versa? Certainly not because the laws of the EC are considered superior to those of EFTA countries. The fact is that it would have been quite simply impossible for the EC to take to pieces a body of legislation which had been worked out over years through many stormy compromises amongst its members in order to start the whole process all over again with the EFTA countries. The only real exceptions, i.e. areas where EFTA standards are higher than those of the EC, are to be found only in the environmental field. For example, Switzerland has also been allowed to maintain its prohibition on a number of toxic substances which have not yet been totally eliminated in EC legislation.

What the EC gives in return

What the EC is giving in return for this almost total adoption of its existing body of legislation, known as the "acquis communautaire", is quite simply free access for the

EFTA countries to the single market with its free movement of persons, goods, services, capital, etc. The whole territory of the EC and EFTA countries will become one huge domestic market in the sense that in the past the territory of Switzerland has been one domestic market – in which products have nevertheless always been made to comply with very high safety, environmental, consumer protection and health standards.

Not a political union, not a currency union, not a customs union

The one thing we have not mentioned so far is what the EEA is not. It is not a political union, it is not a currency union, it is not a customs

union. Switzerland maintains its total trading autonomy in relations with all states which are not members of the EEA. In addition, agricultural products remain a sovereign area, although the long-term target of liberalising trade in agricultural products is mentioned in an annex to the EEA treaty and Switzerland has accepted a package of agricultural concessions to the southern countries of the EC. There are no common immigration and refugee policies, which means that Switzerland's land border controls will not be lifted, even though these borders are exclusively with EEA countries.

The EEA has one single fundamental purpose. This is to integrate Switzerland and the other EFTA countries into the EC single market. There is no hidden political intent.

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Editor's Note: This article has been slightly adapted for inclusion in the Swiss Review.