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Economic areas instead of cantons?

# Fixed structures – flexible p

**Intercantonal cooperation is as old as the cantons themselves. Recently people have been talking of economic areas. Will these replace the cantons? At the moment it looks unlikely.**

In 1994 when the Aargauer, the Oltner and the Zofinger Tagblatt merged into the Mittelland newspaper, the "Arolfingen" concept surfaced again for a moment, a concept dating back to the post-war period of growth-euphoria

*René Lenzin*

when the planners were predicting a Switzerland with more than 10 million inhabitants and imagined the small towns of Aarau, Olten and Zofingen

growing into a new centre between Zurich, Basle, Berne and Lucerne. At the time Arolfingen evaporated as quickly as the Mittelland Zeitung in this form disappeared from the federal media landscape. But the idea of new economic areas extending beyond cantonal borders is becoming once again an issue of the day.

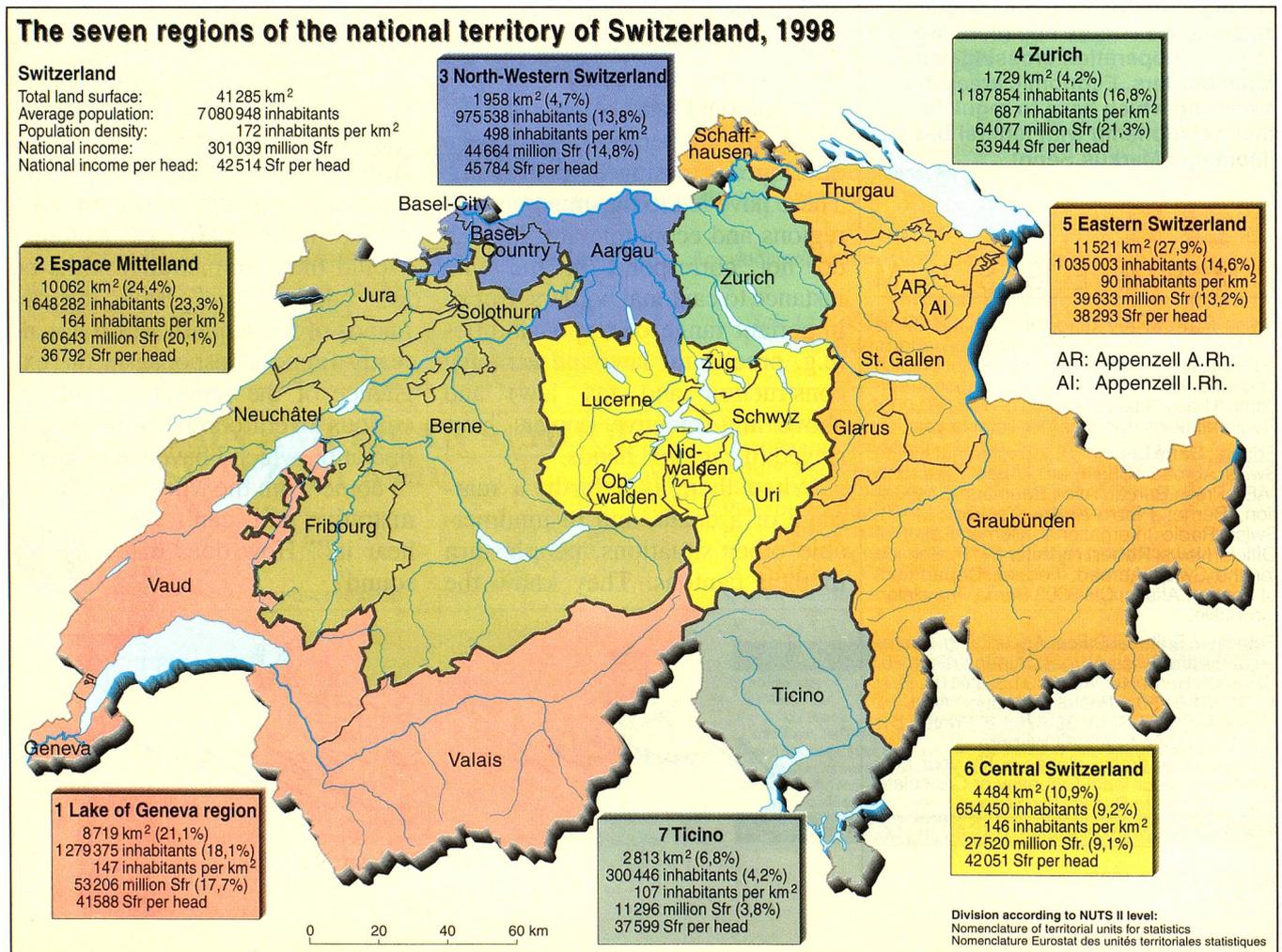
## Against inefficiency 26 times over

Let us say it at once: for the moment there will be no change in a Switzerland which has 26 largely autonomous cantons. This principle is not being challenged in the current constitutional debate. On the other hand increasing internationalisation of politics and industry is beginning to limit the ability of the cantons to shape events and reduce them in many respects to

executive organs. The question arises whether Swiss federalism is still up to date.

In 1996, in his controversial pamphlet "Governing instead of revising", publicist Beat Kappeler postulated a new division of Switzerland into some 6 cantons each with a million inhabitants. He saw this as a way of cutting through the thicket of 26 different school, legal and tax systems and rationalising administrative procedures. These new cantons would continue to fight for the advantages of location, and yet would be small enough to ensure that closeness to the citizen which people so often invoke.

The figure 6 was not simply plucked from the air but was based on studies which had been made at the time. The Federal Statistical Office already operates on the basis of a Switzerland divided into seven large regions (see



# actices

box). And the concept of economic regions increasingly arises in connection with questions of marketing location and regionalisation.

## “Five cantons one region”

If you exclude transfrontier projects such as the “Regio Basiliensis”, the triangle taking in parts of Switzerland, France and Germany, the so-called «Espace Mittelland» is the most concrete of these economic areas. Born in 1994, it consists of the cantons of Berne, Fribourg, Jura, Neuchâtel and Soleure. It is under the direction of a government committee and has its own secretariat. Its activities are supported by academics from the universities of Berne, Fribourg and Neuchâtel.

“Primarily we have to provide the basis for a common economic policy” says Michael Treina, assistant at the Geographical Institute of the University of Berne who coordinates these studies. This is the reason for the term “economic areas”: cantons come together to avoid going under in the globalised competition for locations, and to stand up to areas of economic concentration – in the case of the Mittelland cantons, Zurich and the lake Geneva region.

But there are other areas of cooperation, explains the general secretary of the Espace, Sandra Maissen: increasingly institutional issues and so-called soft factors like lebensraum and culture are to be found on the agenda. The Espace Mittelland may accordingly be described as “a strategic alliance with the objective of protecting the quality of life”. Cooperation within the Espace is very flexible. In some projects only three of the five cantons take part, in others neighbouring cantons are also associated. The cantons of Vaud and Valais already have observer status and Aargau is often integrated in projects too.

But there are also issues which are never discussed in the framework of the Espace, other groupings being preferred. Where questions of teaching materials are concerned, the two French-speaking cantons of Jura and Neuchâtel as well as the francophone

Against the current (I)

## Canton Jura

*Berne and Jura work together in “Espace Mittelland” and in the Conference of the Cantons of West Switzerland, but their relationship is not exactly unblighted. Attached to Berne in 1815 by the Congress of Vienna, Jura again and again saw separatist movements emerge until Canton Jura was finally founded in 1978. Four of the seven districts of the former Berne Jura decided to stay with Berne (Moutier, La Neuveville, Courtelary and Laufen). Later Laufental was transferred to Basle (Rural). Canton Jura still wants to see the unification of “the people of the Jura”. For some years now an inter-Jura conference with balanced representation has been trying to defuse the smouldering Jura conflict.*

Against the current (II)

## The reunification that failed

*The two half-cantons Basle (City) and Basle (Rural) are closely interwoven. Many «rural people» work in the city: in 1990 the city's net commuter balance was plus 42,000, whereas Basle (Rural) showed minus 31,000. Nonetheless attempts to reunite the two half cantons – which were split in 1833 – failed, most recently in 1969 when Basle (City) agreed but Basle (Rural) refused. The regions farthest from the city particularly feared that the Rhine metropolis would carry too much weight, and preferred to stick to intercantonal cooperation. In 1987 a revised constitution came into force which refers explicitly to the independence of Basle (Rural) and aspires to its upgrading from a half to a full canton. Earlier constitutions had each contained an article referring to reunification.*

Against the current (III)

## Common cause with – and against – Berne

*Swiss federalism with its 26 constituent states requires a great deal of coordination between the cantons themselves on the one hand and on the other between them and the federal authorities. There are some 20 intercantonal associations in which officials from a variety of areas meet, ranging from the authorities supervising registry offices to civil defence directors. Heading these bodies there is the Conference of Cantonal Governments whose purpose – according to an agreement of October 8, 1993 – is “to encourage cooperation between cantons in fields falling into their competence, and to ensure the necessary coordination and information of cantons in federal matters affecting them”.*

*One of the main motives for setting up this conference was the cantons' wish to make their voices heard on important national questions such as foreign and financial policy. The conference also serves to strengthen federalism. In the context of constitutional reform the Zurich finance director, Eric Honegger, for instance advocated closer cooperation between the federal and cantonal authorities within the framework of the conference, and argued that the cantons should have a formal right to express their views. Honegger believes that by going onto the offensive where there are intercantonal and regional problems, it should be possible “to take some of the heat out of questions about the ideal number and size of the member states of the Swiss federation which, quite rightly, are raised over and over again”.*

(NZZ, 10./11. January 1998)

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regions of Berne and Fribourg naturally turn to the Conference of the Governments of West Switzerland. They try to deal with transfrontier problems in the so-called "Arc jurassien". Treina also notes that differences of mentality and language as well as considerations of practical politics lead to a reluctance within the Espace Mittelland to become involved in over-bold projects.

### Sovereignty not dismantled

For the moment hardly anybody speaks of transferring real authority to super-cantonal bodies, which in the last analysis would lead to the creation of new administrative units. According to Treina a new demarcation of Switzerland into a few regions for reasons of economic policy should be put forward because the present system of 26 different markets is expensive and does not provide easy answers to questions concerning location. But a weakening or dismantlement of cantonal sovereignty he considers to be completely unrealistic in present circumstances. It is a logical consequence that no references will be found to this in the documentation issued by the Espace. "Naturally this question will come up in the long term" says Sandra Maissen, "but we cannot decide today what happens in 50 years' time".

Resistance to ending cantonal independence would come not only from administrators and politicians faced with a considerable loss of power. Broad groups in the population would also be opposed. It is true that interest in cantonal elections and referendums is as a rule even less than in those at the federal and municipal level, but people will not allow any assault on federalism. When Philippe Pidoux, a Vaudois nation-

al councillor and former member of the cantonal government, last year called for the fusion of Vaud with Geneva, a cry of horror went up in both cantons (see interview). And in Schaffhausen acquisition of the canton's own computer tomography machine was elevated almost to the level of cantonal life and death, and the proposal only just dismissed.

### EU regional policies

So for the moment we shall stick with loose associations within economic areas or regional government conferences (see box). At the same time the pressure will increase for intercantonal and transfrontier cooperation. This has a great deal to do with the regional policies of the European Union; both Sandra Maissen and Michael Treina emphasise the influence these had on the formation of Espace Mittelland. Encouraging the independence of regions some of which have often grown up, over the centuries, amounts to a sort of "Swissification" of the EU, yet it puts Swiss federalism in question. For most cantons are too small to play in the concert of a Europe of the regions.

In sum: anyone today who conjures up the prospect of an end to the cantons misjudges the real situation. But anyone who postulates a Switzerland with 26 cantons in all eternity will have to rethink things in the longer term. An East Swiss member of the Council of States whispers in private: "I am persuaded that we shall have to create a canton of East Switzerland. But because the time is not yet ripe for such a notion, it would be counterproductive to put it to the public." His parliamentary colleague Pidoux will confirm that... ■

### Regional government conferences

**Inner-Swiss Government Conference:** Lucerne, Upper and Lower Unterwalden, Schwyz, Uri, Zug

**Regional Conference of the Governments of northwest Switzerland:** Aargau, Basle City, Basle Rural, Berne, Soleure

**Conference of the Cantonal Governments of east Switzerland:** Appenzell Inner Rhodes, Appenzell Outer Rhodes, Glarus, Grisons, Schaffhausen, St Gall, Thurgau

**Conference of the Cantons of west Switzerland:** Berne, Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Valais, Vaud

**Conference of mountain canton governments:** Glarus, Grisons, Lower and Upper Nidwalden, Ticino, Uri, Valais

Interview with National Councillor

## "Rethinking how



**Philippe Pidoux:**  
"Our 26 lilliputian states are  
obsolete in the world of today."  
(Photos: Michael Stahl)

**Mr Pidoux, you recently proposed fusion of the cantons of Vaud and Geneva. Is this the idea of a technocrat or a dreamer?**

Dreaming is a condition of action. Do we want to hand on a Switzerland paralyzed in its partitions and complexities? Our generation received a privileged country from those responsible for the mobilisation. We have taken on debts beyond all reason and we are leaving it to our children to repay them. When my children ask me what my generation has done, I want to be able to answer that I tried to serve our people by suggesting a different way of organising the country.

**In daily life cantonal frontiers are losing a great deal of their importance. Nonetheless most people are opposed to your idea. How do you explain this contradiction?**

Our suggestion has had a certain success in what I call civil society. But all those who have power now want to avoid losing it, and the administrative machine too is afraid of change. That is