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Agreement on bilateral negotiations

Mainly positive reactions

In Switzerland the conclusion of the bilateral negotiations has been met with general relief, though some reservations have been voiced by centre-right parties and union representatives.

At last: four years of bilateral negotiations between Switzerland and the European Union have now been concluded. The negotiations were set in motion following the Swiss electorate's rejection on 6 December 1992 of entry in the European Economic Area (EEA). On 11 December 1998 the trade agreement was finally signed in Vienna. Provided everything runs

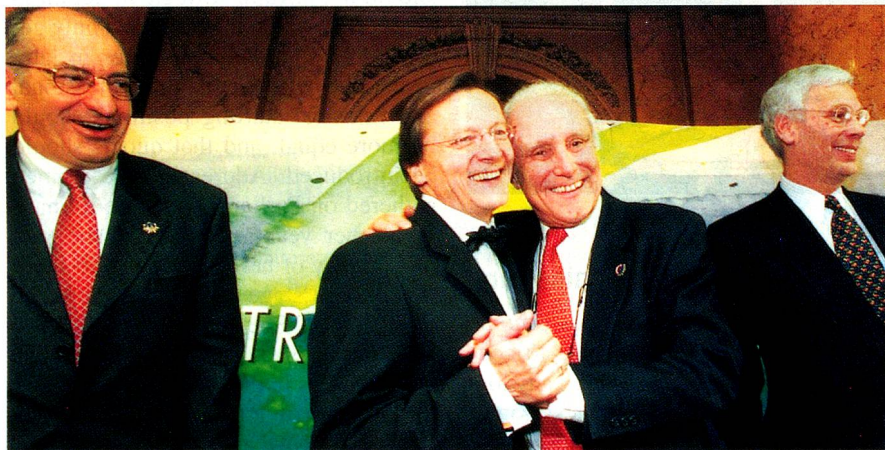
subject of the free movement of people. Without the support of safeguarding measures, social-democratic and union representatives fear the result will be

Dario Ballanti

wage dumping. "Nowadays people are more afraid of wage pressures than they were at the time of the EEA vote,"

bilateral agreement allows Switzerland to cross the threshold into Europe. Large sections of the economy will be able to capitalise on this move: airlines as well as industrial organisations will derive direct benefits from the opening of Europe's door.

Nevertheless, the bilateral agreement should not be looked on exclusively from an economic viewpoint. Two years after the agreements come into force, Swiss nationals will be entitled to live and work in any of the EU's 15 member countries. The free movement of people, coupled with recognition of educational qualifications, will allow Swiss men and women to choose where they wish to study, work and live. In other words, Swiss nationals will finally have the same rights as citizens of EU member countries, even if as a non-member Switzerland has no right of codetermination.



Satisfaction all round after completion of the bilateral negotiations. From left: Federal Councillor Pascal Couchepin, Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Wolfgang Schüssel, Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti and EU Commissioner Hans van den Broek. (Photo: Keystone)

according to plan, the package will come into force at the beginning of 2001 following ratification by the Federal Assembly and the European Parliament.

Referendum threats

Switzerland will probably be faced with the problem of a referendum. Threats to this effect have already been made by the Swiss Democrats and the Lega dei Ticinesi. National Councillor Christoph Blocher of the Swiss People's Party (SVP) has yet to clarify his intentions, while SVP leader Ueli Maurer is now demanding from the Federal Council a withdrawal of the EU membership application. On the left of the political spectrum the only criticism is on the

says Bernese SP National Councillor Rudolf Strahm, who is favour of a minimum legal wage to protect low-income brackets.

An end to discrimination

The successful agreement between Berne and Brussels covers seven dossiers: free movement of people, road and air transport, mutual recognition of trade standards, research, agriculture, and public procurement. Although Switzerland had to make several concessions during the last negotiating phase, particularly in the agriculture and air transportation areas, overall the feeling is that the EU agreement is advantageous. Despite the fact that the EEA would have offered greater opportunities, the

Party splits on EU membership

The debate on EU membership will form the next stage of the Swiss integration process. Even now the question is dividing opinions: "It is a serious mistake to talk of membership," says Liberal Democrat National Councillor Claude Frey of Neuchatel. His opinion is shared by party colleague Georg Stucky of Zug, who is in favour of a second EEA referendum. "I believe there would now be a majority vote in favour of the EEA even in German-speaking Switzerland. By contrast, a vote to join the EU would probably be rejected," he says.

But another Liberal Democrat, National Councillor Peter Tschopp of Geneva, pleads vehemently in favour of EU membership: "Now we must realise where we stand and set our sights firmly on membership. We must become a full member of the EU by the year 2010."

The left, too, is in favour of membership. Speaking for his party, SP National Councillor Andreas Gross of Zurich says, "For many people the conclusion of the bilateral negotiations is only another step closer to EU membership."