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Autor: Ballanti, Dario
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Bilaterals – an indivisible package

BY DARIO BALLANTI

The referendum on the bilateral agreements is the most important in recent years and will decide on our future relationship with the EU.

THE SWISS DEMOCRATS and the Ticino League have made it: while all Federal Council parties are in favour of the agreements, several small factions succeeded in collecting 66 733 valid signatures for the referendum against the bilateral agreements between Switzerland and the European Union (EU). As a result, the Swiss electorate will be turning out on 21 May exclusively to vote on the seven sectoral agreements.

Hopes for normalisation

The bilateral agreements would once more normalise relations between Berne and Brussels following the vote against the European Economic Area (EEA) on 6 December 1992, when dialogue between Switzerland and the EU was brought to a halt. This led to all sorts of business and research problems which those in favour of the agreement claim will be overcome if the bilaterals are accepted.

Yet here opinions are divided: the initiators of the referendum argue that things will deteriorate once the bilateral agreements come into force, particularly in the case of overland transport, where they fear an invasion of juggernauts – and in the area of personal freedom of movement due to the potential influx of foreign (more or less qualified) labour in Switzerland's border regions. This may result in wage dumping i.e. the wages of Swiss workers could also come under pressure.

Pro-bilateral factions counter this with the argument that the Federal Council has

devised a number of flanking measures to address both of these controversial areas (overland transport and personal freedom of movement) in order to attenuate the negative impact.

Let us look first at overland transport: the phased permission of forty-tonne trucks could well cause environmental and traffic problems, but as a countermeasure the mileage-based heavy goods transport tax ("Leistungsabhängige Schwerverkehrsabgabe" or LSVA) will be enforced to encourage haulage contractors to use the railway. To improve rail services, two alpine transversals (Lötschberg and Gotthard) are being built.

Against wage dumping

When it comes to freedom of movement the solution is more complex. The Federal Council plans to implement mechanisms against wage dumping, the most important of which is the possibility of introducing collective employment agreements for specific sectors and declaring these generally binding in the event of misuse. Moreover, in seven years' time voters will have the opportunity to vote on an extension of the agreement on personal freedom of movement. This agreement also offers Swiss nationals an advantage which is not to be underestimated, namely the ability to move and work in any EU country two years after the agreement comes into force.

However, the bilateral agreements are not limited to overland transport and freedom of movement. The package also includes agreements on air transport (with significant advantages for Swiss airlines), the reduction of technical trade barriers, public procurement, agriculture and research (with positive implications for science and the chemical/pharmaceutical industry).


The package, which will come into force at the beginning of 2001 provided the referendum is accepted, can only be judged in its entirety, since the seven agreements can only be accepted or rejected together. 



Photo: Michael Stahl

The European Union is by far Switzerland's most important trading partner.