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EU membership on the back burner

At the end of the 2003 political year, as Switzerland was holding its collective breath during parliamentary and Federal Council elections, EU supporters came to the bitter realisation that EU membership was not an election issue. The only politicians who addressed the European question did so from a standpoint of stubborn opposition. Most came from the ranks of the SVP. In view of the party's growing strength and the election of Christoph Blocher, who owes his success in no small measure to his opposition to EU membership, EU supporters had to accept the fact that the situation was now more complex.

As early as mid-day on 10 December, shortly after the composition of the new government was announced, a friend's e-mail expressed the disappointment of EU supporters. In it, he urged his friends and acquaintances to support the manifesto of the New European Movement for Switzerland (NEMS): "Please sign to register your protest to the triumph of anti-Europeans!" On 21 November, 73 prominent Swiss personalities called for EU membership negotiations to be taken up in 2004 (www.europa.ch): "At the threshold of the new legislature period, this appeal clearly expresses the sentiment that Switzerland's future lies with the European Union, and that only by joining the EU will our country be able to pursue its interests in a dignified manner."

The membership process has now been brought to a standstill. On 28 January, the Federal Council confirmed the priorities of the Bilateral II round and emphasised that only a simultaneous conclusion to negotiations in all areas was acceptable. This view is only partially shared by the EU. The bilaterals may be facing other problems: expansion of the EU to the East, which will bring ten new countries to the negotiating table on 1 May, threatens to make the task even more difficult, as do certain opinions within the EU which claim that Switzerland wants to have its cake and eat it. Switzerland is called upon to make a substantial contribution to strengthening European unity.

As far as actual membership is concerned, recent statements by the Federal Council make it clear that this will not happen until 2006 or 2007 at the earliest, i.e. the end of this legislature. But the implication is that the matter will not necessarily be addressed during the next legislature period. The only thing that now gives EU supporters cause for hope is that the SVP's efforts to withdraw the application for membership have failed. So the issue has merely been put on the back burner.

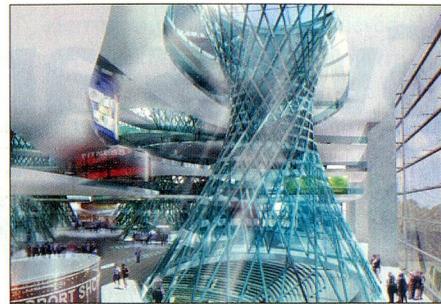
At first glance, Switzerland's attitude to the EU is ambiguous.

By insisting on the fundamental importance of the bilaterals, our country is essentially underscoring the necessity of integration in the EU. Yet the refusal to talk of membership gives the impression of a deal done behind closed doors. It appears that our politicians are afraid of openly admitting to Swiss citizens that there is no way round the European issue.

The second paradox lies in the fact that Switzerland is perceived abroad as a country turned in on itself. As citizens of the world, you are the living proof that the opposite is true. You proved this in the survey conducted last year by the gfs Institute: 58 percent of you want Switzerland to join the EU by 2007. Our architects, who are featured in this issue's Focus section, also reflect this open, cosmopolitan spirit: they construct buildings around the world, creating new objects with no thought of restrictive boundaries.

Charly Veuthey

Translated from German.



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Basle architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron achieved international fame with their Tate Gallery of Modern Art in London: an astonishing mixture of sober geometry and artistic flair.

TITLE PICTURE: Nils Jorgensen / REX Features

SWISS REVIEW

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