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More and more communes are merging

At the beginning of 2009, there were more than 250 fewer communes in Switzerland than just ten years ago. Migration from peripheral and mountainous regions and increasingly complex responsibilities are encouraging communes to merge. However, many villages still insist on maintaining their independence in spite of problems, and mergers are not always voluntary.

By René Lenzin

Bauen is the smallest commune in the Canton of Uri. The village of 200 residents went through a political crisis at the beginning of the year. Three residents were elected to the communal council against their will. To avoid taking office – serving in office is mandatory in the canton – they moved away leaving the executive body with just two members and unable to function. Just as the canton was about to introduce forced administration, three more volunteers finally put themselves forward for election to the council, one of whom was a former president of the commune.

Not all small communities across Switzerland have experienced such dramatic events as those in Bauen, but the problems of the village in Central Switzerland are symptomatic of those faced by many small communes. Few residents are willing to put themselves forward for offices such as school management, social services or even the communal council. The same people often spend years or even decades in these offices, and the number of candidates who put themselves forward at elections is frequently exactly the same as the number of offices available. This hardly represents the ideal of a thriving democracy based on opposing ideas and personalities.

Added to this is the fact that the responsibilities of the communes, such as education, social services, water and power supply and waste disposal, are becoming increasingly complex and can only be discharged in conjunction with other communes. But even the limits of intercommunal cooperation will soon be reached, not least from a financial perspective. As well-qualified people migrate to the urban centres where it is easier to find employment, the small communes in the peripheral and mountainous regions will be left with tax revenue shortfalls and will therefore be unable to invest.

More mergers than ever before

An increasing number of communes are attempting to resolve these problems by merging. As many as 79 became part of larger authorities between the beginning of 2008 and the beginning of 2009 – more cases than ever before in a single year. At the start of this year, there were 254 fewer communes in Switzerland than in 2000, and 465 fewer than in 1950. Only 104 communes disappeared in the 100 years prior to that, and therefore since the establishment of the federal state.

There are significant cantonal differences. The canton that has lost the most communes since 2000 is Fribourg (74), followed by Ticino (64), Grisons (22), Valais (20) and Jura and Lucerne (19 each). Thurgau had already witnessed the vast majority of its mergers before this time. The number of communes there fell from 179 to 80 between 1990 and 2000. Further reductions

can be explained by the cession of land. Berne had almost 100 fewer communes when the Canton of Jura came into existence and Laufental transferred to Basel-Landschaft. However, there are also cantons with exactly the same number of communes today as in 1848, such as Appenzell Auser-rhoden, Obwalden, Schwyz, Uri and Zug.

15 of the 26 cantons have taken measures to promote the merger of communes. These generally involve contributions for the planning and implementation of mergers. Some cantons take on the debts of localities willing to merge, or they offer general financial support to the newly formed communes. Ticino has been one of the most active cantons in this respect in recent years (see page 22).

The people of Glarus are more radical than their government

There have been hardly any mergers in Glarus. But the cantonal assembly has now approved what is probably the most radical reform of communes seen in Switzerland. On 7 May 2006, the people's assembly narrowly approved a motion from a citizen to reduce the number of communes from 25 to 3. This decision is remarkable for two reasons. Firstly, the government and cantonal parliament had "only" proposed a reduction to 10 communes. Secondly, the move appears even more radical when you consider that in Glarus there are 20 educational, 16 wel-



At an extraordinary cantonal assembly in November 2007, the voters of the Canton of Glarus resoundly rejected a reversal of the previous year's decision to merge 25 communes to create three new communes.

fare and 9 citizens' communes, each with its own powers, in addition to the 25 local communes.

The number three was not simply plucked out of the air. The canton, which has 38,000 residents, is effectively already divided into three regions – Unterland, Mittelland and Hinterland. The three new communes will be created from these regions that have differing levels of economic prosperity. “This is an historic decision – for Glarus and indeed for the whole of Switzerland”, said Marianne Dürst, FDP cantonal councillor, after the cantonal assembly. She went on to say that the three-commune model was consistent with the canton’s planning regions and was a long-term objective of the government, but that the government had planned a politically feasible route and had never conceived that “the people of Glarus would take this major step to just three communes in one go”.

The cantonal assembly decided that the Glarus commune reform was to be implemented by 2011, and incidentally reaffirmed this decision in November 2007. An extraordinary cantonal assembly had been convened after 2,000 voters called for the previous year’s merger decision to be reversed. An overwhelming majority again supported the three-commune model. Opponents unsuccessfully argued that the decision contravened the communes’ constitutional right to self-determination.

Merger projects in French-speaking Switzerland, too

“Merger fever” has long gripped all regions of Switzerland, including the French-speaking part of the country. Many communes have merged in recent years in Fribourg, Valais and Jura. Seven merger projects are currently underway in Vaud, the canton with the second-highest number of communes after Berne, and ten further projects are in the pipeline. A quarter of the current 375 communes are involved.

The number of communes in Neuchâtel fell from 62 to 53 on 1 January this year. Nine villages in Val-de-Travers joined together to form a locality with 11,000 inhabitants. And some people want to go much further. In an interview with “Le Temps” newspaper, Raphaël Compte, President of the Neuchâtel Communes Association, recently outlined plans for a canton with just eight localities. However, he added that the proposals were still theoretical at this stage. The people firstly have to be convinced that the mergers make sense. He knows what he is talking about – the planned merger of two Neuchâtel communes has just been rejected by the local population.

And this is certainly not an isolated case. A majority of voters in other cantons continually reject merger proposals. The autonomy, tradition and manageability of the existing communes are more important to the opponents of mergers than the possible

benefits of large communes. Mistrust of larger neighbouring localities is also often a factor, and significant differences in the tax systems can result in opposition in communes where taxes are lower.

Lucerne wants to become a major city

Most of the mergers to date have concerned small and tiny communes in peripheral and mountainous regions. However, the merger trend has also gained momentum in medium-sized cities in recent times. For example, the financial and economic centre Lugano in Ticino has grown significantly (see page 22). And Lucerne too is preparing to incorporate surrounding localities. It will join together with Littau next year, increasing its population from 58,000 to 75,000.

However, that is not enough for the mayor, Urs Studer. He would like to see the city merge with other suburbs. The parliaments of Emmen and Horw have already agreed to examine such a project. If Ebikon, Kriens and Adligenswil were also incorporated, Lucerne would be larger than the federal capital Berne. It is not a question of prestige or size for Studer. He recently told the “Tages-Anzeiger” that mergers were a matter of survival. He said: “Lucerne is bursting at the seams. We scarcely have any more development land on which to expand.” He went on to say that the economy could only achieve more dynamic growth if the city were to increase in size.

These are ambitious plans, for which Studer is even prepared to make concessions. He is enticing the wealthy commune of Horw with the promise that the tax system of previously the most favourable locality will automatically apply in the new commune. And he is offering to take on the debts of the less prosperous Emmen. Whether this tactic will work will be revealed in the next few years.



Lucerne is seeking to merge with its neighbouring communes, to distribute centre charges more evenly and to become a major city. Having won the approval of voters in Littau, this commune will merge with the city of Lucerne in 2010. Others are likely to follow suit.

COMMUNE MERGERS

A number of communes in Switzerland have merged, which means that your place of origin may have changed automatically. A simple Internet search (e.g. at www.wikipedia.org), entering the name of the commune, will usually provide you with additional information and the name of the “new” commune.