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“Seeing the EU as nothing more than an export club is completely wrong”

Michael Reiterer was the EU ambassador in Berne from January 2007 until the end of 2011. Even during difficult times, he made a major contribution to enabling constructive discussions between Switzerland and the EU. An interview at the time of his departure.

By Barbara Engel

“SWISS REVIEW”: You were the first EU ambassador to come to Berne in 2007. Was Berne a destination you wanted at the time?

MICHAEL REITERER: Yes, even in the EU system you have to apply for a job, and I applied for the Switzerland post. I had lived in Switzerland previously – I spent two years studying in Geneva and two years with the Austrian delegation to GATT. I’m now returning to Brussels with nine years’ experience of Switzerland.

Why were you interested in the position of EU ambassador to Switzerland?

I was attracted by the prospect of establishing something new. There had previously been no EU representation in Berne. I started off with nothing more than a rented building. I also found the opportunity to live and work here for a longer period of time appealing as I was already very familiar with Switzerland and its virtues.

Relations between Switzerland and the EU have become strained in recent times. The tone adopted is sometimes not very friendly. Are you glad to be leaving Berne at this point?

No. I don’t believe relations have become more strained. The issues have always been more or less the same since the Swiss voted against joining the EEA in 1992. We have constantly been seeking a modus vivendi ever since. This has to be adapted from time to time because the EU has changed.

How has the EU changed?

First and foremost, it has increased in size from 12 to 27 states. The internal market has grown and deepened. The framework conditions have changed. As a consequence, we also need to find new forms of cooperation between the EU and Switzerland.

From a Swiss perspective, Brussels sometimes makes unachievable demands. This has caused fronts to harden.

I don’t wish to talk about fronts because we are not fighting a war. Switzerland clearly wants to participate in the European Union’s internal market. The EU, for its part, has to ensure that the rules that apply within the internal market are uniform across the board. Discussions with Switzerland about this are currently ongoing. I am confident that now that the parliamentary and Federal Council elections in Switzerland are over we can adopt a more offensive approach to these discussions again.

In Switzerland, there are several sensitive issues associated with fears about the free movement of persons and the EU. The buzzwords are “foreign judges” and “social tourism”. Can you understand this?

I’ve got an anecdote to tell you about this. A cantonal politician once told me that foreign judges from Lausanne introduced the right to vote for women. This illustrates how relative the term “foreign judges” is. Switzerland is a member of several international organisations that have their own jurisdiction. For instance, Switzerland does not have an issue with being subject to WTO jurisdiction on trade disputes. There are also Swiss judges at the European Court of Human Rights, and a Swiss judge even represents the principality of Liechtenstein at the EFTA Court. It would appear that exporting foreign judges does not present a problem. As far as “social tourism” is concerned, the Swiss State Secretariat for Economic Affairs will readily confirm that the institutions of the Swiss social security system would be in a very poor state if it were not for the contributions of foreigners. Fears arise because sensationalist and populist language is used.

Which areas are on the EU wish list for the bilateral agreements with Switzerland?

The EU does not have a wish list. But there are some issues that are being negotiated, such as free trade in agriculture. Switzerland is holding things up here. There are also negotiations on the internal electricity market, an area where common interests exist.

An analysis from Brussels in “Swiss Review” suggests that Switzerland’s approach is perceived as “cherry-picking” in Brussels. Is that true?

I recently put this question to the President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy. He said that it was certainly not an expression he would use. There is no question that Switzerland benefits from political stability and economic prosperity in Europe. The Swiss government and most of the Swiss people also appreciate this. It is therefore important that the EU is seen as a project in which everyone plays a part. When it comes to developing Europe further, for example through expansion, active participation is vital. Relationships between states are like those between people – you communicate, think things through together, work together and when one refuses to talk, the others notice this. The same will also apply to developments we have yet to encounter.

The keyword is development of the European Union – a peace project has turned into a commercial association.

Seeing the EU as nothing more than an export club is completely wrong. It has actually developed the other way round. The European Economic Community was set up first, and this later became the European Union. The latter incorporates close cooperation and integration in the fields of justice, migration, asylum, foreign policy and security policy. Of course, the internal market



Michael Reiterer, the EU ambassador in Berne, returned to Brussels at the end of 2011. He made frequent public appearances in his five years as ambassador, such as at the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Lugano last year. Reiterer is succeeded in Berne by British diplomat Richard Jones.

remains important and we have the euro as a result of this. It also requires us to coordinate our policies. But the political project is equally important, with Europe wanting and needing to appear united.

How and where does the European Union play a united role?

The global political situation is going through radical changes. There are new players, such as the G20 and an emergent China, which is reclaiming its position in the world. The USA remains the strongest military power but faces competition from Europe and Asia as an economic force. There are also competing ideas. Something more than just a commercial association is required in this environment. Europe must assert its values because the EU is first and foremost a community of values.

What values does the EU represent?

Democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law are the fundamental values on which the EU was built. Great importance

is also attached to these goals in the EU's foreign policy in its relations with other states.

But the institutions that exist in the EU for this purpose are weak?

We have strengthened our institutions through the Lisbon Treaty. The new positions of EU President and High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, which are currently held by Herman van Rompuy and Catherine Ashton, are intended to get the EU more involved in global politics and are succeeding in doing so.

In what way?

The EU supported the Arab revolution. The UN Security Council's resolution on the protection of the Libyan civilian population was initiated by the EU, and the EU worked with the Arab League to obtain its approval. All of this is extremely political. These are not the actions of purely a free

trade organisation. The EU has also successfully intervened in conflicts much further away from Europe, such as the Aceh conflict in Indonesia. The Indonesian government explicitly requested the EU as a mediator rather than a national state.

The German Chancellor recently said that we need a new EU. Does the euro crisis really call everything into question?

I don't know exactly what Ms Merkel meant by that. But, of course, in tackling the debt crisis it has become clear that individual countries need to coordinate their policies to a greater extent, particularly their economic policies. The bail-out plans have, after all, been approved by the countries. This is something completely new. Nobody would have thought such resolutions possible two years ago.

Has the EU grown too quickly, as critics constantly claim?

It depends on which area they are referring to. From an economic perspective, the EU may well have grown too quickly. Its absorption capacity has indeed reached its limits. But, as we have already said, the EU is a political project. After 1989, the primary aim was to stabilise the Central and Eastern European states freed from the shackles of communism and to ensure they developed democratically. The aspiration to create and maintain an area of democracy and freedom has always existed in the European Union. This has worked. The EU was and remains a peace project. That comes at a price.

The EU supported the Arab revolution.

You are now returning to Brussels. What role will you take up there?

I will rejoin head office after ten years of service abroad.

That doesn't sound very exciting.

You won't find many diplomats, irrespective of which country or service they are from, who are enthusiastic about returning to head office. But it's standard practice, and after two or three years you are assigned elsewhere again.

Do you have another dream destination?

I would like to be an ambassador again in an Asian country.