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Sovereignty and cooperation

THE ISSUE OF HOW SWITZERLAND SHOULD IN FUTURE STRUCTURE ITS RELATIONS with other countries in general – tax agreements being one area of interest – and with the European Union in particular is currently causing controversy at home. During a visit to Brussels made by Swiss President Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf and Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter at the end of March, José Manuel Barroso, the President of the European Commission, told the Swiss in no uncertain terms that Switzerland was severely testing the EU's patience.

Barroso, who is very familiar with Switzerland and the Swiss having studied in Geneva, must have known that his words would not go down well with many Swiss politicians or in the media. This indeed turned out to be the case. The demand from Brussels for Switzerland to adopt new EU legislation automatically and to accept superordinate authorities for arbitration and supervision in the event of disputes if it wishes to participate in the EU single market in future has met with huge opposition in Switzerland. This situation is extremely unpleasant for the Swiss government. It is concerned not so much about the EU's demands as about the unavoidable debate about participation and integration in the EU. This will prove highly challenging for the Federal Council on the domestic front. The Swiss People's Party (SVP) has been painting a gloomy picture for some time, suggesting that Switzerland will perish within the foreseeable future if it loses its complete independence and sovereignty.



However, fallacies are being proliferated and facts overlooked in this debate. Switzerland cannot decide its destiny independently, not in the world and certainly not in Europe. Our sovereignty has long been restricted as there are countless agreements – air traffic, Schengen/Dublin and public procurement, to name but a few – where EU law is already adopted. These have given rise to very few problems and it would be no different if Switzerland adopted applicable European Union law in the EU single market. If Switzerland refuses to accept this, tremendous damage could be done to the economy. Switzerland and our relations with other states would certainly benefit from a little less of the special case charade and a little more sovereign willingness to cooperate – sovereign here in the sense of wise and well considered.

The focal topic in this issue has something to do with our unique position in Europe and much to do with our prosperity. It concerns spatial planning, urban sprawl, mobility, conservation and the protection of our cultural heritage. It is also about the issue of whether Switzerland will soon have a single agglomeration stretching from Geneva to Romanshorn and whether something of the original Swiss idyll can be preserved through new ideas.

Finally, dear readers, I would once again like to encourage you to sign the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad's petition on e-voting, the right to participate in elections and referenda electronically. E-voting is extremely important for the Swiss abroad as it makes their participation in Switzerland's political decision-making much easier. The petition can be signed at www.petition.aso.ch. The signatures will be presented to the Federal Council at the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in August.

BARBARA ENGEL

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