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"I see myself as Swiss and Asian, as a person quite simply"

Two years ago, Ambassador Hans Jakob Roth was given the task by the Federal Council of coordinating Swiss foreign policy with the border regions in neighbouring states. He primarily views himself as a mediator. His many years of experience with other cultures has proved extremely beneficial.

Interview by Barbara Engel

"SWISS REVIEW": The position of Ambassador for Cross-Border Cooperation was created two years ago. Was there a particular reason?

HANS JAKOB ROTH: It came about as a result of the foreign policy strategy adopted by the Federal Council in March 2012 in which relations with neighbouring states and the European Union were defined as a priority in Swiss foreign policy. It was therefore deemed appropriate to appoint a special ambassador for cross-border cooperation. This service already existed and had been part of the International Law Division until 2006. It had become increasingly evident that many issues could not be resolved just on a legal level, but instead had to be addressed at a political level.

What is your role?

My task, in general, is the coordination of foreign policy in the cross-border regions – between the competent authorities at federal level as well as between federal government and the cantons with their governments. This requires the development of a good personal network and personal relationships with the relevant politicians and officials, in the cantons usually the heads of the chancellery. I therefore devote a great deal of time to fostering relationships and analysing problems. I have no authority to issue instructions to these people and can only use powers of persuasion. The FDFA is in fact directly responsible for very few cross-border issues. The cantons have extensive powers in regional cross-border foreign policy, while other authorities are usually responsible for specialist matters.

What day-to-day issues do you face?

One of the problems we face with cross-border cooperation is the fact that we are dealing with neighbouring countries, above all France and Italy, which are organised differently in terms of political structure. Many

matters that fall under the authority of the cantons in Switzerland are decided upon by Paris and Rome in our neighbouring countries. This means that federal government in Berne is also involved in these processes. Under the Federal Constitution (art. 56, par. 3), federal government mediates in contact between the cantons and major foreign authorities.

Can you think of a specific example?

In the Geneva region, for example, there are problems with personnel in the healthcare sector. France trains people who often then go to work in Switzerland, resulting in precarious situations in French hospitals and care institutions. We are now in the process of concluding a framework agreement at federal level with the government in Paris that will enable the canton to find a solution directly with the neighbouring country. In specific terms, this will involve training personnel together.

The new inheritance tax agreement is causing great concern among the Swiss abroad in France. Are you also involved here?

No, not directly. Our service only really deals with issues that affect the border situation directly. I can give you a current example – France is planning to change the fundamentals of its health insurance system from the middle of next year. Anyone living in France will be entirely subject to the French system. For people who, for example, have been receiving treatment for chronic illnesses in Switzerland for years, this means that they may no longer be able to maintain this. Will they be granted a transitional period in which to organise care in France or will the contributions to care costs be discontinued overnight? Our service deals with such issues in cooperation with other departments and the cantons.

We have noticed that right-wing parties with sometimes xenophobic agendas have enjoyed

great success in elections in the border cantons of Geneva and Ticino. This phenomenon has not arisen in the border canton of Basel. Why is that?

A kind of closed cultural area has existed in the Basel region for centuries. The "Waggi", a pivotal figure in the Basel carnival, actually comes from Alsace rather than Basel. Alsatians are therefore part of the city of Basel's culture in a sense. The situation in Ticino and Geneva is different, as this spirit of cross-border unity does not exist to the same degree. There is perhaps also a tendency to look for scapegoats across the border in times of difficulty. However, in my experience, the representatives of the opposition or of the parties you refer to are very cooperative within the government in the search for solutions to cross-border issues. I have also stressed this point to French representatives, as fears were expressed there after the election to the Geneva cantonal government of a member of the Mouvement des citoyens.

You have just published a book entitled "Die Krise des Westens – eine Krise des Individualismus" (The Crisis of the West – a Crisis of Individualism). Tell us about this book.

It is an analysis of Western society, primarily European society, from an Asian perspective. I lived in Asia for twenty years, mainly in China and Japan.

So you now feel Asian?

I identify with both Swiss and Asian people. I feel an easy and close bond with Asians. I admire their way of doing things and how they foster relationships.

Could you give us more of an insight into what your book is about? How does individualism relate to the crisis in the West?

Our society's strategic focus is no longer right. We have secured our role as global leaders through individuality and man's in-

dependence from his group. However, this independence has reached a level today where it constitutes a lack of responsibility. In our society positive developments are accepted and perceived as a matter of course, while negative ones are immediately blamed on society.

Decisions will be made in the near future on the extent to which international law should prevail over national law in Switzerland. Have the debates received attention abroad and have any comments been made to you?

Nothing has been said to me so far.

You will join the Centre for Security Policy in Geneva at the beginning of 2014. What will your role be?

Much of my work will be in a teaching or training capacity. I am relishing the prospect because I firmly believe that intercultural understanding and intercultural training are extremely important. This training obviously cannot simply anticipate the experiences that a diplomat, for example, will have but it can prevent unpleasant surprises and help to prevent mistakes. This is not primarily about table manners, which are covered by every travel guide today, but rather interpersonal skills. For instance, mistakes made when forging relationships in Asian society can be almost impossible to rectify.

What are the key points when dealing with Asian partners?

Relationships are essentially always a matter of proximity and distance. Asians place more emphasis on proximity than we do, which is also true of many people who do not belong to European civilisation. However, they make a much greater distinction between their own circle and outsiders. Harmony and consensus are extremely important in their own circle, whereas outside groups are excluded. We Swiss are very similar in some respects.

You are due to retire in two years. Will you return to Asia?

I plan to live in a city in eastern Asia, but I don't know where yet. Even as a senior citizen there, I will certainly make my intercultural experiences available to businesses or other sections of society.

Hans J. Roth

was born in Thurgau, grew up in Basel and has worked for Switzerland's consular and diplomatic services for over 30 years.

After serving in Tokyo, Beijing, Shanghai and Hong Kong, he has been the Ambassador for Cross-Border Cooperation for the past two years. He will join the Geneva Centre for Security Policy (GCSP) at the start of 2014. The GCSP is a foundation established in 1995 with 45 member states to promote the building and maintenance of peace, security and stability. The GCSP was founded by the Swiss Federal Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, in cooperation with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, as a Swiss contribution to Partnership for Peace (PfP). It primarily provides consultation and training on security issues and intercultural affairs, particularly for diplomats and military personnel. Some 45 people work at the GCSP. www.gcsp.ch

The photos come from a feature for SRF's ECO show.

BARBARA ENGEL is the editor-in-chief of "Swiss Review"

