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Switzerland works by direct democracy. Everyone is regularly invited to go to the polls and have their say in national politics. This deeply embedded culture of co-determination was suspended by the pandemic for a few months before returning emphatically in early autumn. “Super Sunday” on 27 September saw an extremely high turnout as the people had their say on a number of significant issues. Top of the list was a resounding no from the Swiss electorate to the SVP’s “limitation initiative”, which clarified Switzerland’s position towards the European Union (EU). Voters want to maintain the current partnership-based bilateral arrangement with the EU.

If the initiative had passed, it would have most certainly marked the end of the close relationship between Switzerland and the EU. As a non-EU country, Switzerland cannot leave the EU. Yet for Switzerland, surrounded by EU member states, terminating the bilateral agreements would have been on a par with such a scenario.

The people expressed themselves clearly, but this should not be interpreted as a ringing endorsement of Brussels. The relationship between Switzerland and the EU is one of conflicting perspectives. On the one hand, close proximity naturally results in economic, cultural and even personal interdependence. However, most Swiss are not primarily supporters of the EU as an institution; their interest lies more in a Europe of open borders with freedom of movement – something that people value even more now since the lockdown showed us just how small our country really is when the borders are closed. The people opted for a pragmatic approach: “European openness” and accessibility means having a regulated relationship with the EU.

The eligible voters of the “Fifth Switzerland” mainly live in the EU and their support for the bilateral relationship was particularly strong. Nonetheless, that does not mean Switzerland and the EU are now ready to ride off happily into the sunset. Nothing could be further from the reality. Partnerships work by establishing agreements – and the diplomatic back and forth over the small print of the bilateral agreements will continue. The stage is set for further drama, as we explain in this edition’s Focus report.

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