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The United Kingdom and the European Union:

What would a "Brexit" mean for the EU and other States around the World?

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With a foreword by Alexander Stubb

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Switzerland

Christian Nünlist

British Euroskeptics often portray Switzerland as an attractive alternative model to EU membership. But the "Swiss model" with its bilateral special solutions has recently come under severe pressure. There are clear links, especially evident to the Swiss, between how Brussels is behaving toward Switzerland and the idea of a British exit. Switzerland could become an example of the limitations on what some British Euroskeptics think the UK can achieve.

There is a certain irony in the fact that Winston Churchill delivered his famous 1946 appeal to create a "United States of Europe" in Switzerland, in the auditorium of the University of Zurich. Churchill's Zurich speech is widely regarded as the starting point for European integration after World War II – despite the fact that both the United Kingdom and Switzerland still have difficulties dealing with European integration. An aversion to deeper European political integration remains widespread in both countries. As a latecomer to the European Economic Community (EEC), Britain's struggle with European integration has seen it negotiate a special place with opt-outs and rebates. Switzerland, though geographically located in the heart of the continent, like Britain has a strong insular mentality. Despite not being in the European Union, Switzerland has negotiated a special bilateral relationship with Brussels, allowing it to participate in the EU on special terms.

It is therefore no wonder that in British Euroskeptic circles, the discussion of a possible UK withdrawal has included the idea of an alliance between the two insular-minded states. This hypothetical quasi-paradise has been dubbed "Britzerland." There are indeed striking parallels between the United Kingdom and Switzerland, for example with regard to domestic debates about the economic impact of voluntary nonparticipation in the euro zone and the Single Market or about the perceived disadvantages of intra-European labor migration. The British debates are thus followed with special interest in Switzerland, with some hope, but also with concern.

Two Islands in Europe

As an island, the UK is naturally at arm's length from the continent of Europe and claims a special position within the EU. Switzerland was also considered an "island in the middle of a stormy sea," in the nineteenth century the only democratic republic among Europe's monarchies and in the twentieth century as an "island of peace," spared from both world wars. During the Cold War, Switzerland was part of the West. Because of neutrality and sovereignty concerns, however, it refused to join the United Nations or NATO. With the exception of economic and technical cooperation within the framework of the Marshall Plan and the then OEEC (Organisation for European Economic Co-operation), Switzerland in 1947 chose a strictly independent foreign policy.[70] It was quick to realize, however, that it had to deal with Europe on a bilateral basis in order to avoid being completely isolated. By 1956, Bern concluded a consultation agreement with the "European Six" – Switzerland's bilateralism with the EU thus had a long history before 1992.[71]

Switzerland and the UK hewed to the same line on European matters, especially in the mid-1950s, when they were forced to come up with a counterstrategy to the EEC in order to minimize the economic disadvantages of being outside the developing European bloc. The planned customs union between West Germany, France, Italy, and the Benelux countries posed a dilemma for Switzerland, because at that time around 40 percent of its exports went to these six countries – to West Germany in particular. High external EEC tariffs would have hampered trade and hurt Swiss companies. Ideas for a greater free-trade zone in the OEEC framework were rejected in Paris, on the grounds that the EEC would "dissolve like a sugar cube in a cup of English tea." In response, in 1960 the UK, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Austria, and Portugal created the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) as a community of seven states to compete with the EEC.

The common European policy of Switzerland and the UK in the EFTA framework was threatened as early as 1961 by the "betrayal" of the British, who surprisingly submitted an EEC membership application. In 1963, French President Charles de Gaulle's rejection of the British application was celebrated by the Swiss as the "liberator of Switzerland," because association plans with Switzerland had also already been drafted in Brussels.[72] In 1972 the EFTA countries succeeded in concluding a free-trade agreement with the EEC for industrial goods. The citizens of Switzerland accepted the deal with an impressive 72.5 percent of the vote.

To date the European political philosophies of the British and the Swiss have remained very similar, even though the UK left EFTA in 1973 and joined the EEC, whereas Swiss voters rejected accession to the European Economic Area (EEA) in December 1992 with a slight majority of 50.3 percent, thus cementing Switzerland's "special path" in Europe. The main goal of both British and Swiss European policy has always been economic cooperation. Over the years both countries have publicly distanced themselves from some of the high policy areas such as a common foreign and security policy as well as from the goal of an "ever closer union."

Britzerland outside Europe

Euroskeptics in the UK like to refer to the model of Switzerland as an example of how relations with Europe could be successfully shaped from outside the EU. In late 2008, the Conservative MEP Daniel Hannan wrote a paean to Switzerland's alternative model of relations with Europe, "Why Can't Britain Be More Like Switzerland?"[73] In the journal article, he wondered why Switzerland, as a nonmember of the EU, had suffered the least in the European economic crisis and still produced growth rates of over 3 percent. He pointed out that Switzerland's per capita exports to the EU market were more than twice as high as those of the EU member Britain. As the scenario of a British EU referendum has grown more likely, the Swiss model has become more popular in the UK. The British press has spoken of Britain outside Europe as a "Greater Switzerland"[74] or a "Switzerland with nuclear weapons."[75] The comparisons with Switzerland were even more in vogue after David Cameron's speech in January 2013, although he admitted that while he admired Switzerland, the UK could achieve a better deal. In April 2014 a young British diplomat even won a 100,000 euro "Brexit prize," awarded by the Institute of Economic Affairs, for an essay suggesting that a post-EU UK should negotiate a special outsider position somewhere between the positions of Switzerland and Turkey.[76]

Switzerland follows the Brexit debate with great interest. Media analysis has noted the "dangerous kinship" between the two countries, drawing attention to the similarities in rejecting political integration by pointedly asking, "Will we be brothers in decline?" The UK Independence Party (UKIP) was presented as a "turbocharged SVP" (the right-wing, Euroskeptic Swiss People's Party [SVP] became the strongest political party in Switzerland after its successful 1992 campaign against Switzerland joining the EEA), with UKIP leader Nigel Farage described as a fanatic.[77] In other articles and op-eds, the Swiss and British were jointly characterized as "recalcitrant Europeans" and "problem children of the EU."[78]

In a late 2012 interview with the Swiss weekly Die Weltwoche, London Mayor Boris Johnson campaigned for a new political alliance outside the EU – a "Britzerland"[79] – with Switzerland and the UK at its core, whose members, later to include Norway and Sweden, would be allowed to trade freely with EU members, but would not be obliged to participate in all of the other EU activities.[80]

However, the question remains: Is the bilateral way still the silver bullet, not only for Switzerland but also for the UK? The "Swiss model," though adored by Euroskeptics in the UK and elsewhere, no longer corresponds to the reality of Switzerland's actual relations with the EU. In spite of unilateralism, Switzerland today is de facto semi-integrated into the EU. The bilateral way did not send Switzerland into isolation, but led to rapprochement with the EU through ten treaties. In the area of domestic security, Switzerland directly participates in the EU's Schengen regime, even if the Swiss do not have a direct say in its opera-

tion. Switzerland and the EU profit from free trade and are closely intertwined economically. In 2013, 55 percent of Swiss exports went to the EU; 73 percent of Swiss imports had their origin in the EU (where 57 percent of Switzerland's external trade is with neighboring countries Germany, France, Italy, and Austria). Because of its strong economic dependence on the EU, Switzerland unilaterally adopts most EU legislation by way of what is called "autonomous enactment." Switzerland also contributes financially to EU programs; in 2012 the sum came to 664 million euros.[81]

Thus, Switzerland's independence from the EU is largely illusory and greatly exaggerated in political rhetoric. Nevertheless, the bilateral track remains very popular among Swiss citizens. Until 2014, all bilateral treaties with the EU had been approved by the Swiss voters, with 67.2 percent in 2000 ("Bilaterals I"), 54.6 percent in 2005 (Schengen/Dublin), 56 percent in 2005 (extension of freedom of movement to the ten new member states that had joined the EU in 2004), 53.4 percent in 2006 (cooperation with central and eastern Europe), and 59.6 percent in 2009 (expansion of free movement to Bulgaria and Romania).

2014: The Swiss Model Revisited

The surprising outcome of a popular vote in Switzerland has, however, changed the Swiss perception of the British EU debate rather dramatically: on February 9, 2014, Swiss voters narrowly accepted the so-called mass immigration initiative of the SVP with 50.3 percent, thus challenging free movement between the EU and Switzerland that had come into effect in 2002. Switzerland had committed itself in 1999 to respect free movement, one of the EU's core principles and a fundamental right of EU citizens. On the basis of the "guillotine clause,"[82] the EU is now free to terminate all ten bilateral treaties with Switzerland if the latter decides to uphold the vote and violate the treaty guaranteeing free movement.

Euroskeptics in the UK and elsewhere were quick to praise the courage of the Swiss to limit immigration from the EU and to fight the negative consequences of the free movement of persons within Europe.[83]

Ahead of the vote, Swiss Euroskeptics had, for their part, pointed to recent efforts by David Cameron to make the free movement of persons less free and to restrict both immigrants' access to social assistance and the influx of Bulgarians and Romanians through quotas. The British countermeasures against alleged "welfare tourism" from eastern Europe were taken up by the SVP in their election campaign for the immigration initiative. With great satisfaction, national Councilor Christoph Blocher (SVP) registered that Cameron was now voicing the same demands that the SVP had pursued for many years in Switzerland. At that time, there appeared to be a real likelihood that Switzerland and the UK would be able to fight jointly for exceptions in the free movement regime and that Switzerland could profit from the internal EU debate on immigration. In general, the debate in the UK is, from a Swiss perspective, an interesting indicator of the EU's readiness to engage in reform discussions that go to the core of long-standing Swiss–EU controversies, such as those regarding the distribution of jurisdictions between Brussels and European capitals. If these reform discussions were to satisfy British concerns, they would probably also satisfy Swiss interests. In addition, representatives of British banks and car manufacturers have recently begun to speak out and warn of the negative impact that EU withdrawal would have on the British economy; this debate could also influence Switzerland's debate on its future relations with the EU.

But the harsh reactions of the European Commission in Brussels, regarding both Cameron's announcement to restrict the movement of persons in the UK and the narrow yes-vote on the mass immigration initiative in Switzerland, may be interpreted rather differently. Precisely because of the exit scenario, the EU could be tempted in the coming months and years to adopt a hard line and make an example of Switzerland, with a view to applying pressure on the UK. To be fair, in this regard, the EU's approach to Switzerland is not entirely new. In recent years, Brussels has become increasingly dissatisfied with the sectoral bilateralism and has long demanded an institutional agreement with Switzerland. In principle, Brussels is aiming to establish a relationship with Switzerland that is similar to its relationship with EEA countries such as Norway.[84]

Against this backdrop, Brussels could be particularly adamant vis-à-vis Switzerland, in particular with respect to Swiss restrictions on the fundamental freedom of movement.[85] The EU's initial reactions seem to support such an interpretation:[86] the European Commission blocked negotiations with Switzerland on electricity, and suspended Swiss participation in the EU student exchange program (Erasmus) and in an EU research program (Horizon 2020). In 2013, Swiss universities received 1.8 billion euros from EU research funds; the UK received 2 billion euros – British elite universities thus view the recent punitive strike by the EU against Switzerland with great concern.[87]

The EU could therefore deliberately put a damper on the Swiss model by showing that there can be no access to the Single Market without freedom of movement and by demonstrating that Switzerland is more dependent on the EU than vice versa. The idea that bilateralism can serve as a panacea for a prosperous economic future outside the EU would quickly lose ground, which would also affect British EU debates. The signal would be clear: the time of cherry-picking and à la carte access to the Single Market has its limits, even for Switzerland.

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