

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 48 (2021)
Heft: 4

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Turning point with an unclear outcome

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"Berne slams the door shut." This is how the normally rather staid "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" described the Swiss government's unilateral decision at the end of May to abandon negotiations with the European Union (EU) – after seven years of discussions on a framework agreement that was meant to provide a sound basis for relations between non-EU Switzerland and the EU. A framework agreement that the Federal

Council has now consigned to the wastepaper basket. Slamming doors can make people jump. They ask themselves what is going on. But it was not just the bang that was startling. The decision is also unusual, out of character, and troublesome for a country like Switzerland.

It is unusual, because Swiss politics has always been about consensus building. Throwing in the towel after years of marathon negotiations is not what you expect from the Swiss government. It is a drastic step to take, given the uncertainty that it creates.

It is out of character, because as a small country Switzerland prides itself on dialogue. The Swiss government can often be counted on to engage in diplomacy and dialogue when other European countries are looking for an argument or threatening sanctions.

Finally, it is troublesome that the position of the Federal Council altered radically over the years despite the contents of the treaty remaining the same during this time. The finishing line seemed to be in sight as recently as 2019. Apparently, all the government needed to do was to "clarify" four points. But fast forward to 26 May 2021, and, lo and behold, the same government says there are "insurmountable differences" with regard to the exact same draft. Has the Federal Council been sleepwalking?

The decision represents a turning point. It creates uncertainty for well over 400,000 Swiss who live in the EU. How it will affect their lives and livelihoods remains to be seen, but it will likely make these more complicated rather than easier.

How political are the young people who cannot yet vote but will one day be able to pass verdict on current events themselves? We interviewed sixteen 16-year-olds, asking them for their views. Their responses are more pertinent than you may think, given that several cantons in Switzerland are considering lowering the voting age to 16. The latest edition of "Swiss Review" focuses on this younger demographic who have the future in their hands.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover photo: Sixteen-year-old Johanna from Brugg (canton of Aargau) photographed by Kaspar Ruoff

"Swiss Review", the information magazine for the "Fifth Switzerland", is published by the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad.

