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Signature of the bilateral framework agreements on Switzerland’s contribution to the enlarged EU on 20 December 2007 in Berne

Thursday, 20 December 2007
Berne

The spoken word is final!
Mr. Deputy Prime Minister,
Ministers,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Federal Council, I should like to welcome you most cordially to the signature of the bilateral framework agreements on Switzerland’s contribution to the enlarged EU. At the same time, I should like to extend a special welcome to all representatives of the partner countries who have done us the honour of travelling here today especially for this occasion.

Today’s event is of historic significance. With the signature of the bilateral framework agreements between Switzerland and the ten countries that joined the EU on 1 May 2004, we are giving the go-ahead for enlargement contribution implementation, thus not only triggering the technical processes of project identification and execution but also opening a fresh chapter in relations between our countries.

Since the political turning point at the end of the 1980s, these relations have gradually intensified at political, economic and cultural level. In the Nineties, they were sustained by the great respect and support of the Swiss public for the population of countries which achieved freedom, independence and democracy by popular means. These are values which also played a crucial role in Switzerland’s own foundation as a nation. Practical measures followed hard on the heels of this spontaneous solidarity: since 1990, Switzerland has backed economic and democratic reforms in Central and Eastern Europe for a total of 3.6 billion Swiss francs.

Technical cooperation is just one aspect. Over the past seventeen years, closer personal contacts have also developed between our countries. Above all, this trend has been furthered by the partnerships between local communities, but also between hospitals, universities and other institutions, which have sprung up between Switzerland and the new member countries. There are now 127 active community partnerships that make a major contribution to promoting better mutual understanding.
The enlargement contribution was based on a decision taken by the Swiss people. Just over a year ago, the Swiss electorate voted for the Federal Law on Cooperation with Eastern Europe and thus for Switzerland’s contribution to the enlarged EU. This is all the more remarkable because, basically, earmarking tax revenue for other countries is not a particularly popular measure or one that is easy to put across. Switzerland’s decision to make the enlargement contribution should not therefore be interpreted merely as a pragmatic policy decision. Without any false sentimentality, I can say that this should also be seen as a gesture of solidarity on the part of the Swiss with people in the new EU countries to whom history has been much less kind than to the majority of Switzerland’s citizens.

Switzerland is not a member of the European Union but has always felt it belonged to the European community of values: freedom of the individual and social justice, protection of human rights and sustainable use of natural resources are central tenets of this shared European self-image. With the enlargement contribution, Switzerland is demonstrating support for and helping to consolidate these values in the enlarged EU.

In integrating twelve new countries over the past three years, the European Union has accomplished great things. We should like to pay tribute to its achievement of finally overcoming the division of Europe and making the Cold War history. Europe has thus taken a gigantic stride towards the aim pursued by the EU’s founders of securing lasting and continent-wide unity, peace and prosperity – a situation and development from which Switzerland too benefits. In this knowledge, we are also willing to make our contribution. We see helping to shoulder the financial burden of eastward enlargement of the EU as a long-term investment in successful relations with the new partner countries and with the EU per se.

The enlargement contribution has given rise to great expectations all round: on the part of the EU and the governments of the partner countries, on the part of representatives of industry and, last but not least, on the part of the citizens of the partner countries and of Switzerland. The inhabitants of the new EU member countries expect the Swiss contribution to strengthen regions and
fields where EU funds cannot cover the backlog of accumulated needs. Businesses in the partner countries and in Switzerland are hoping for contracts and new market opportunities for their products and services. The Swiss who voted for the contribution to the new EU member countries on 26 November 2006 expect the enlargement contribution to be implemented effectively and their tax money to be carefully and efficiently managed.

As President of the Swiss Confederation, I should like to add another expectation to what is already a long list. The enlargement contribution is not just a tool for project implementation. I trust it will serve as a catalyst for even closer relations and will strengthen the political, economic and cultural links that exist between our countries. The booming trade of recent years is one indicator for the intensification of cooperation between Switzerland and the enlarged EU. But I am convinced that the potential for economic – and especially political – cooperation is far from exhausted.

Closer cooperation is possible and appears to be appropriate – particularly because Switzerland has quite a lot in common with the new EU members. With the exception of Poland, these countries and Switzerland belong to the group of smaller and medium-sized European states. Seen in isolation, the political weight of our countries is limited. However, by intensifying cooperation and coordinating our policies in international bodies such as the UN, the World Bank or the Council of Europe, we can strengthen our positions and hone our countries’ political profile.

Time is too short for me to go into detail about the broad scope for potential cooperation. I should just like to emphasize that the expectations in connection with the enlargement contribution are very high and wide-ranging. Now, the challenge facing all of us will be to meet them, progressively and through constructive dialogue. Making the enlargement contribution a success story for all concerned calls for cooperative partnership. With this collective signature of the bilateral framework agreements, we would like to highlight the partnership nature of our cooperation. Let us join forces to see that the great expectations are met and that the promising prospects of in-depth cooperation between our countries can be brought to fruition.