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### **1. Federalism in Swiss foreign policy**

Switzerland and federalism are inseparable. Without its federal system, Switzerland would be a different country. The Switzerland we know today was only made possible by the conscious decision to forgo an all-powerful central government and to devolve power and responsibility. Federalism is a radical idea and an incredibly successful one. For me therefore, the International Conference on Federalism 2002 has a special meaning: it is the conference this year in Switzerland. And the fact that it is taking place in St Gallen rather than in the federal capital, Bern, is a conscious expression of Switzerland's conviction about federalism.

I am aware that in Switzerland a Federal Councillor must be careful not to extol the virtues of federalism too enthusiastically. Everything he says can be turned against him. And he may also find himself reminded of the remark that Napoleon once made to the Swiss: "How can you hope to set up a central government? You don't have enough great men. You would even find it hard to find a competent country squire."

### **2. The role of the cantons in Swiss foreign policy**

For me, federalism as the form of government in Switzerland is not up for discussion. However, we do need constantly to discuss improvements and

adaptations. This is the only way to keep our model of federalism dynamic and up-to-date. And over the last few years, there has been intensive discussion on the role of the cantons in Swiss foreign policy.

The traditional split between foreign policy and domestic policy is becoming increasingly difficult. The Swiss foreign ministry is called the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. But the line between what is foreign and what is domestic is becoming increasingly blurred. For me, therefore, it was logical that in our new 1999 federal constitution and in a new law on the participation of the cantons in foreign policy, the cantons which make up the confederation, have been drawn more closely into the processes of opinion forming, decision making and implementation. This law came into force in 2000 and includes the following objectives:

- To ensure the participation of the cantons in foreign policy;
- To keep the cantonal governments informed about foreign policy matters;
- To take cantonal interests into account in preparing and implementing foreign policy decisions;
- To defend those areas of cantonal power which are affected by bilateral and multilateral international treaties;
- To increase the acceptance of foreign policy in the cantons.

This law does not involve a transfer of power to the cantons, but it ensures their right to a say in foreign policy. Take, for example, the participation of the cantons in those European Union (EU) committees where Switzerland has a

place because of its bilateral agreements with the EU. The cantons participate in those discussions that are directly relevant to them.

Although the responsibility and management of Swiss foreign policy remain with the confederation, the cantons have autonomy in certain cross-border matters.

I am referring here to cross-border cooperation in particular. In foreign policy, as in domestic policy, the principle of subsidiarity is important. The cantons have the authority to defend their interests in those areas of foreign affairs that directly affect them. Nowadays, borders are no longer seen as obstacles but as valuable opportunities. It is often forgotten that the majority of Swiss cantons, that is, 15 of the 26, share a border with a foreign country. This is why Switzerland attaches ever-greater importance to cross-border cooperation. Nowadays, the cantons are active to varying degrees in cross-border cooperation in many fields including cultural affairs, tourism, energy, regional planning, transport, and civil protection. As a result, cross-border cooperation has become increasingly institutionalised in Switzerland. This canton, St Gallen, for example, participates in the Internationale Bodenseekonferenz (the International Conference of Lake Constance), which was set up in 1972. The Conference members include representatives of the St Gallen government and the governments of the two Appenzell half-cantons, Schaffhausen and Thurgau, on the Swiss side, and the governments of the Länder of Bavaria and Baden Württemberg on the German side, as well as the governments of Liechtenstein and of the Austrian Land of Vorarlberg.

For me, this devolution of part of our foreign policy to the cantons is not a problem. As foreign minister, I am convinced that this cantonal foreign policy can be better developed and more efficiently implemented at the regional level than if I, in Bern, had to deal with important questions on behalf of the affected areas. I also believe that no one loses by shared sovereignty – not only in foreign policy, of course. In fact I believe the opposite: shared sovereignty strongly benefits everyone in a country.

### **3. Federalism as an instrument of Swiss peace policy**

As a result of its experience with federalism, Switzerland has been able to make major contributions to some current peace processes.

The issue of the right of peoples to self-determination and the unity of the state have become very contentious in recent years. The disintegration of both the Soviet Union and the former Yugoslavia have made us acutely aware of the importance and complexity of the issue. Today's conflicts are often caused by two relatively simply identifiable factors.

First, tensions arising in connection with how groups of people see their identity, for example, their membership of a particular ethnic, religious, cultural or linguistic group.

Second, tensions arising from problems concerning the distribution of economic, political or social resources. Many modern conflicts are caused by both these factors simultaneously.

I can hardly think of a recent conflict that does not involve issues of power sharing and the protection of minorities.

Resolving such problems is usually a lengthy and tedious process. Solutions require both in-depth knowledge of the region in question and a high level of competence in specialised areas. Switzerland has therefore decided to deepen its expertise in the fields of constitutional law, decentralisation, power sharing and minority protection, and to increase cooperation with networks of experts outside the federal administration. As a result, we have succeeded in making a useful contribution to solving a number of recent conflicts. Let me give you a few examples.

- In 2000, at the request of the transitional government of Somalia, Switzerland set up a working group which has since been dealing with various technical questions concerning the process of constitutional reform in that country. The working group is chaired by a Swiss constitutional expert from the Institute of Federalism at the University of Fribourg.
- In Sri Lanka, with the prospect of a possible peace settlement and the post-conflict period that will follow, Switzerland will make experts available on constitutional law and on federalism.
- In Sudan, Switzerland's Special Representative for Conflict Issues has designed a comprehensive "architecture for peace", one of whose main objectives is to launch a process for the establishment of local institutions. In addition, earlier this year, military delegations from the north and south of Sudan were invited to Switzerland to look at the Swiss army and to see how federal approaches can work in the military context.

- And who would be surprised to know that during the negotiating process in Cyprus, in which Swiss legal advisers took part, the “Swiss model” was frequently mentioned?
- In South-Eastern Europe, Swiss peace-building programmes are focusing on projects to improve the protection of individuals and of minority rights. Here too, progress can only be achieved by different ethnic and religious groups gaining a deeper understanding of each other. And in many cases this understanding can only be achieved in the long term through federal structures.

Switzerland’s contributions to peace settlements do not just appear out of the blue. Our contributions inevitably bear the hallmarks of our own political identity. And federalism is an integral part of that identity. It is not my intention to promote this model of government as a magical solution for conflict regions. Our federalism cannot be exported or prescribed. Federalism is also not always the best way to avoid conflict. But we try, on the strength of our own experience, to explain the pros and cons of the federal system within individual peace processes.

We also want to apply our experience to our development policy, which brings me to my third point.

#### **4. Decentralisation and development**

As a result of the failure of numerous centralised governments, decentralisation – and by this I mean the development towards federal

structures – has become fashionable. I see four particular advantages of decentralisation:

- It strengthens democratic development;
- It can adapt to local conditions and needs;
- It better protects the rights of minorities;
- It is more efficient.

For many years, Switzerland's development cooperation agency has been supporting local efforts to promote decentralisation in a number of countries in the South, as well as in eastern European and the Commonwealth of Independent States countries. We also support the World Bank through our programmes. But support for local development only bears fruit if it is tailored to people's needs. Closer proximity to the local population enables local and regional governments to identify and solve important grass-roots problems. Governments themselves become efficient partners in development cooperation.

But here again, it should be stressed that decentralisation is not a panacea for all the problems which central governments find themselves powerless to solve today. I want to emphasise that badly conceived decentralisation programmes can exacerbate regional differences. Each country must therefore find its own solution, with an appropriate balance of centralisation and decentralisation tailored to its own conditions. And, I should add, decentralisation cannot be achieved overnight.

Decentralisation is a political culture. It permits all individuals and groups to strengthen their identity in a spirit of tolerance and mutual respect. It helps people to live with differences and to cope with them. If decentralisation helps to promote such a culture, then federalism is not only a lasting answer to the challenges facing Swiss society. It is an answer to the challenges facing societies all over the world.

## **5. Conclusion**

In concluding, I would like to return to Napoleon, who is reported to have said: “A series of fortunate events have called me to lead the French government, but I still consider myself incapable of governing the Swiss.”

I would answer him as follows: “Switzerland still exists, and exists in peace and prosperity. We owe this not to an emperor or an imperator but to federalism, and we want to share our experience with the world.”