

Swiss-EU meeting put on ice after Brexit vote

The article below originally appeared on the Swissinfo website. Switzerland's referendum decision to limit EU migration is causing some friction. Our Chairman heard a report on BBC Radio 4 that the EU had withdrawn access to the Erasmus programme of scholarships from students in Switzerland as a sanction over this matter.

A formal meeting between Switzerland's chief negotiator and the European Union was cancelled Monday as EU representatives focused on fall-out from British voters' decision to leave the EU. Bilateral relations with Switzerland following the so-called Brexit vote are not a top priority.

An official meeting between Jacques de Watteville, Switzerland's main negotiator with the EU, and the European Parliament was cancelled on Monday as a result of the British referendum vote. De Wattewille nonetheless met informally with his EU counterpart, Christian Leffler, in Brussels.

"I'm happy that discussions are continuing," de Watteville said. "Switzerland remains on the EU radar."

Following Swiss voters' decision in February 2014 to limit immigration from the EU, Switzerland has been waiting to hold difficult negotiations over quotas and bilateral treaties. EU officials had decided to postpone those talks until the results of the Brexit vote.

De Watteville tried to give a positive message on Tuesday: "We are not at a dead end."

Over the weekend, Swiss President Johann Schneider-Ammann told the *SonntagsZeitung* and *Le Matin Dimanche* newspapers that he still sees "certain opportunities" for a solution between Brussels and Bern over the free movement of people in the light of the Swiss vote to introduce immigration quotas. He specifically mentioned the possibility of a "bottom-up safeguard clause," which would allow quotas to be placed on workers in specific regions and economic sectors instead of throughout Switzerland. The clause would allow quotas to be activated in those areas and sectors if certain thresholds are reached.

Different parties, different solutions

However, according to the *NZZ am Sonntag* newspaper, other Swiss political parties do not believe such a clause would work. For example, the left-wing Social Democrats, the Greens, and the centre-right Conservative Democrats believe holding another vote on the EU quotas issue would be a better solution.

Former cabinet minister Christoph Blocher, now a leader in the conservative right Swiss People's Party, told the *Schweiz am Sonntag* newspaper that he doesn't think another vote is the way forward. According to Blocher, the EU is afraid that ending the free movement of people agreement with Switzerland would result in a chain reaction involving other countries.

"If I were the EU, I would find a solution with Switzerland quickly so that this doesn't also launch a fight," Blocher said.

And Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter sees a window for Switzerland to solve its issues with the EU after the Brexit vote, as he told the *Schweiz am Sonntag*.

“The EU and Switzerland should together have the courage to find a mutually acceptable and legally secure solution,” he said, adding that Switzerland could become a sort of “test laboratory” for the EU’s coming negotiations with Britain.