

The Lake Constance region: Continuing a European Success Story Together

Declaration of the heads of government of the International Lake Constance Conference (IBK) on the occasion of their meeting 29/30 June 2023 in Brussels

Four nation states, ten states and cantons, three different settings and speeds of European integration: at first glance, the wider region of Lake Constance may appear to be characterised mainly by borders. However, the region is in fact a largely unified common economic area and living space for 4.2 million inhabitants. The area is absolutely closely knit together - unique among border areas in Europe. Indeed in the region of the International Lake Constance Conference, people “live” Europe on a daily basis - and have done so for generations:

- intensive commuter movements in all directions
- high-volume cross-border trade
- commonly used major infrastructure
- one of the most highly industrialized regions worldwide with a large number of world market leaders and an above-average high-tech workforce compared with the EU
- a network of 25 universities and institutions of higher learning organised as an EGTC
- a high-profile tourist region of world renown

The International Lake Constance Conference, founded in 1972 by states and cantons around Lake Constance, pursues one goal: To further develop the region successfully as an attractive living, environmental, cultural, scientific as well as economic space. The IBK has succeeded in setting valuable impulses and has completed numerous projects with aplomb, starting with the water quality of Lake Constance, low-tech buildings, common spatial planning, setting up cross-border ambulance systems, supporting cultural institutions and projects and cross-border public transport. In short, the IBK success story is long and varied.

The IBK has both benefited from and contributed to European programs and initiatives, such as Interreg. Moreover, the IBK has ambitious goals for the future: sustainable mobility across borders, engaging and encouraging youth participation, expanding and strengthening the region as a hub for business, science and innovation.

To remain successful and secure the stability and prosperity of the IBK region, reliable and permanent framework conditions are absolutely essential. Switzerland today is a highly integrated partner with a strong international outlook. It is thus with great concern that the states and cantons of the region, as well as the border regions further down the Rhine, are witnessing a slow erosion of the bilateral treaties between Switzerland and the European Union. This will directly affect people on all sides of the border. In fact, some negative effects are already felt keenly today: research and science cooperation suffers due to Switzerland's reduced access to Horizon Europe, the provision of electricity and network stability is challenged due to the lack of an agreement on electricity. And the fact that the MRA on medical devices has ceased to apply for Switzerland, and the same is looming for machine and building products, leads in effect to new trade barriers and jeopardizes the provision of essential goods. The covid pandemic in turn has demonstrated the importance of a health agreement for the protection of the population on all sides of the border.

Europe must not miss the opportunity of tapping the potential that a stronger growing-together of cross-border areas offers. Therefore, the states and cantons of the Lake Constance region address the following appeal to the Swiss Federal Council and the European Commission to search for sustainable, reliable answers on the future relationship between Switzerland and the European Union, including:

- urgent efforts to secure a stable long-term and legally reliable basis for Swiss-EU relations
- quick and full association of Switzerland with Horizon Europe and Erasmus+
- readiness for new cooperations on topics of future relevance, such as on climate, energy and health promotion and prevention

The International Lake Constance Conference has practiced direct regional dialogue across borders at the highest level for decades - a model cross-border region as it were. The new Lake Constance Government Commission is an initiative and an attempt to include national-level governments in this dialogue. The International Lake Constance Conference can and will use its experience to contribute actively to cross-border understanding at the European level.

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