

The free zones: a tailor-made economic frontier

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The free zones created around Geneva at the time of its entry into the Confederation are a remarkable legal innovation. The new frontier between Switzerland, France and the Kingdom of Sardinia threatened to cut the city off from its natural hinterland, which supplied it with foodstuffs. To avoid this isolation, the treaties provided that certain neighbouring areas, in the Pays de Gex and in northern Savoy, would lie outside the French or Sardinian customs line, so that their produce could enter Geneva without excessive hindrance.¹

This regime lasted for more than a century. After the First World War, France sought to abolish it, which gave rise to a dispute with Switzerland. The case was brought before the Permanent Court of International Justice, which held that France could not abolish the zones unilaterally.² A subsequent arrangement settled the practical details of the regime.

The history of the free zones illustrates how a small financial centre can obtain, through negotiation and law, arrangements suited to its geographical situation. It also shows that such arrangements depend on the goodwill of neighbours and can be called into question. The contemporary Franco-Vaud-Geneva region, with its daily flows of cross-border workers and its cooperation agreements, carries on this tradition of cross-border arrangements, whose stability depends on relations between Switzerland and its neighbours, and in particular on the bilateral agreements with the European Union.

1 Notes

1. Archives d'État de Genève, pages “Les zones franches (1)” and “(2)” (archives-etat-ge.ch): by the Treaty of Paris of 1815 France ceded communes of the Pays de Gex and withdrew its customs line behind the Jura; by the Treaty of Turin of 1816 the King of Sardinia ceded

communes in exchange for Saint-Julien and a second zone was created (Salève, Annemasse, Douvaine), extended in 1829; these zones, Geneva's "agricultural reserve", ensured the free movement of persons and foodstuffs; in 1860 the Savoyard plebiscite ("Oui et Zone") extended the regime to the Genevois, the Chablais and the Faucigny. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Zones franches". ↩

2. Archives d'État de Genève, page "Les zones franches (2)": the Treaty of Versailles abolished the annexation zone and proposed to replace the zones with regional agreements, which the Swiss people rejected; in 1923 the Poincaré government unilaterally abolished the zones and brought the customs cordon back to the political frontier; Switzerland seised the Court at The Hague in 1928, arguing that the Gex and Sardinian zones rested on the treaties of 1815 and 1816. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. "Zones franches": judgment of the Permanent Court of International Justice of 7 June 1932 restoring the small zones in return for preferential treatment of zone produce by Switzerland; award of Territet of 1 December 1933, the basis of the present regime. ↩

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