

Switzerland–EU

Who do the cantonal representatives actually represent?

by Lukas Leuzinger*



Lukas Leuzinger.
(Picture ma)

When Switzerland debated its first federal constitution in 1848, centralists and federalists were at loggerheads: the former wanted to completely break the power of the cantons, while the latter wanted to maintain the existing loose confederation of states based on the principle of “one canton, one vote”.

In the end, a compromise was reached: a parliament with two chambers. Seats in the National Council are allocated according to population, while all cantons have an equal number of seats in the Council of States. In addition, important decisions such as constitutional amendments require a majority of both voters and cantons. Without these safeguards for their sovereignty, the cantons would hardly have been prepared to relinquish some of their powers in favour of the new state.

Federalism and cantonal sovereignty are therefore not simply the result of historical developments – they are constitutive elements of the Swiss federal state. Without cantonal sovereignty and federalist right to have a say modern Switzerland would not exist. But this core element of the Swiss state structure is under attack. By whom?

By the cantons.

The most recent example: on Friday, the *Conference of Cantonal Governments* (KdK) *announced*¹ that it supported the new package of agreements between Switzerland and the EU by a majority (21 votes to 4, with one abstention). This package of agreements severely restricts democratic participation in Switzerland through the “dynamic” adoption of legislation. What’s more, the cantons’ rights to have a say are also being curtailed. The consultation procedure, a



The EU treaties abolish the cantons’ legislative powers in the field of energy. Hydropower, as seen here at the Grande-Dixence dam in the canton of Valais becomes an EU matter. (Picture Jérémy Toma, Wikimedia)

crucial channel for the cantons in the democratic process, is in many cases being eliminated or rendered meaningless. The cantons’ legislative powers in areas such as energy and transport are being abolished and transferred to the EU level.

Now, one might argue that the economic advantages of the agreement outweigh these democratic disadvantages. What is irritating, however, is that the majority of cantons (15 to 10 votes with one abstention) reject the idea of subjecting the treaty package to a double majority of the people and the cantons. This is despite the fact that the agreements touch on the core of the Swiss state structure and renowned legal experts consider a mandatory referendum to be *appropriate*.² With 15 votes, the required quorum of 18 votes was not reached, which would have allowed the KdK to issue an official statement on behalf of the cantons. But the fact remains: the majority of cantons are in favour of undermining their own sovereignty and their right to have a say.

The decision is thus part of a worrying trend.

- During the coronavirus crisis, the cantons were downright afraid to take responsibility. Instead, they begged the federal government to take action – and to provide *more money*.³
- The “austerity package” (the term is misleading, as it would only slightly slow down the growth of spending) currently being discussed

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in parliament provides for cuts in cash flows from the federal government to the cantons (e.g., in the area of asylum or for universities) – and promptly, the cantonal representatives collectively cried foul. In doing so, they overlooked the fact that every cash flow is accompanied by a corresponding shift in competence. If the federal government takes over the financing, it also wants decision-making authority.

- This applies to fiscal policy in general: time and again, the cantons willingly accept money from the federal government or even actively stretch out their hands. One example is supplementary childcare, which is a classic cantonal responsibility. However, the cantons prefer to let the federal government pay. For over 20 years, the federal government has been providing “start-up funding” for daycare centres and similar facilities. This subsidy, which was originally intended to be temporary, is now to be made permanent and enshrined in law.
- This mechanism is also repeated in the EU treaties: the cantons support the package, but

at the same time point to the “additional financial burdens” and demand corresponding “support from the federal government” in the areas affected.

The federal government sees every financial commitment it makes as an invitation for more (federal) regulation. As a result, cantonal powers are shifting to the federal government. And the cantons seem to be quite happy with this.

To put it bluntly, they are saying to the federal government: “We will accept our disempowerment if you compensate us financially.”

A federalism that has such advocates no longer needs opponents.

Source: <https://schweizermonat.ch/wen-vertreten-eigentlich-die-kantonsvertreter/>, 27 October 2025

(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)

¹ <https://kdk.ch/aktuell/medienmitteilungen/details/die-kantone-unterstuetzen-das-abkommenspaket-schweiz-eu>

² <https://schweizermonat.ch/die-schweiz-waere-nicht-entstanden-wenn-wir-kein-doppeltes-mehr-haetten/>

³ <https://schweizermonat.ch/die-schweiz-waere-nicht-entstanden-wenn-wir-kein-doppeltes-mehr-haetten/>