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Autor: Calmy-Rey, Micheline / Keller, Gabrielle
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A plain-speaking Foreign Minister



Martin Stollenwerk/Remotephoto

Federal Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey

Micheline Calmy-Rey is giving foreign policy a new image: the Federal Councillor is not one to mince her words. She hopes that Swiss Abroad will contribute to "an open, cohesive Switzerland".

"Swiss Review": Federal Councillor Calmy-Rey, what is your relationship to the Fifth Switzerland?

Micheline Calmy-Rey: On my trips abroad I occasionally meet fellow Swiss citizens. Such encounters allow me to see how much our compatriots contribute to Switzerland's image in their country of residence. So they are rightfully called the "ambassadors of Switzerland".

The Confederation is making cutbacks in areas which affect Swiss Abroad and the image of our country abroad. This move runs like a leitmotif through the various departments. Even modest investments are being reduced. I'm thinking of the pressure on Swiss schools abroad, the trimming down of the consular network, and the cancellation of government subsidies for swissinfo. Exactly how important are Swiss Abroad to the federal authorities?

The impact of the Confederation's cost-cutting efforts is being felt by Swiss Abroad and Swiss at home alike. Nevertheless, it has been possible to keep up the budgets available to my department. That applies to the DFA's contribution to the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad, the budget for "Swiss Review" and the budget for "Presence Switzerland". Talk of trimming down the consular

network was abandoned years ago. The services which our representations provide to our compatriots abroad have not experienced any cutbacks. In my view it is not at all unreasonable for the Confederation to try to reduce costs as Swiss Radio International switches over to an Internet platform. But the Confederation has no intention of abandoning swissinfo. The new law on radio and television will lay down the terms and conditions governing future government support. The budget for Swiss schools abroad is a more critical issue.

But I can assure you that, despite their efforts to cut spending, the federal authorities have not forgotten the Swiss Abroad. Comparatively speaking, Switzerland does a great deal for its citizens abroad. For example, the provision whereby a citizen abroad is entitled at least to temporary welfare benefits from the Confederation in the event of economic distress is unique to Switzerland.

Are you not concerned that such spending cuts could prove counterproductive in the long term?

Certainly the state should not save "to the point of extinction". So the Confederation's spending cuts must not go so far as to affect areas which have proved their value in the past and are worth retaining.

Your core interest is in human rights and peace. You convey your commitment in this regard effectively in the media. How close to the people can a politician try to be without compromising the seriousness of the issue?

I am simply trying to do my job. I want to take Switzerland forward, position the country well, and protect its interests. Being close to the people and their concerns can hardly be a disadvantage.

Some observers believe that your foreign policy approach does not especially fit the image of a small, neutral Switzerland. Your department increasingly states its position on external issues. What price neutrality nowadays?

The status of permanent neutrality forbids us becoming a member of a military alliance because this could draw us into a conflict between states. But neutrality is not synonymous with ambivalence. Neutrality is also an obligation. One cannot be ambivalent in the face of genocide. A neutral country without a hidden agenda or expansionist

ambitions can and must speak plainly in such cases, and it therefore makes a credible impact.

Do you share Federal Councillor Blocher's opinion that neutrality protects a country against terrorism?

It is not appropriate for me to comment on statements made by another member of the Federal Council.

You want to promote peace by fighting poverty. Specialists disagree with this view, particularly in relation to Moslem terrorist groups, and claim that the motivation behind terrorism is a political bid for power rather than material need.

To fight terrorism effectively, one must address its causes. Even if there is no direct connection between poverty and violence, poverty (and particularly the lack of any prospects of economic or social improvement) encourages the growth of terrorist organisations. So combating terrorism is at the very least helped by fighting poverty.

Since the last general election, you have been the only woman on the Federal Council.

Where does Switzerland stand in terms of women's rights? Where, in your opinion, is there room for improvement?

Legally speaking, we have largely achieved equality between men and women. What we are dogged by are the outdated ideas of roles that dictate, for example, voting behaviour or our institutions. Women frequently associate politics with a male role model. We need more women in politics in order to eradicate such images. This is where the political parties need to act. Too little consideration is given to women's earning power in the working world or in education. In terms of achieving a balance between family life and work, much remains to be done by politicians and the business sector.

Regarding Switzerland's relationship with the EU: At this point in time, Switzerland can only take the bilateral path. Is that not frustrating for you? Isn't the bilateral path a dead end?

The path of bilateral accords was the one chosen by Swiss voters and implemented by the Federal Council.

If you are a Euro-skeptic, you can view the bilaterals as a good way of protecting our interests without having to join the EU.

If, on the other hand, you are a Euro-optimist, you can look on them as a means of strengthening cooperation with the EU.

What impact will enlargement to the east have on our relationship with the European Union?

EU enlargement to the east signifies the final step in dismantling the economic and political division of Europe brought about by the Cold War. So it constitutes an important step in improving the prosperity and stability of our continent. The Swiss population will also benefit. By and large, the major challenges facing Switzerland today are the same ones facing our neighbouring states. An expanded, economically and politically stronger Europe that is able to address these challenges successfully can only be positive for us.

Where do we stand at present? We have just completed the political stage of nine new bilateral accords with the EU and its 25 member states. That shows that the bilateral option is also possible with an expanded EU. The path will certainly not be easy, but then it never was.

As our Foreign Minister you are the first ambassador of the Fifth Switzerland. How do you expect Swiss Abroad to take part in Swiss politics?

It would be presumptuous of me to say what I expect. I am simply pleased to note that almost 90,000 fellow citizens living abroad actively exercise their political rights. And naturally I would be delighted to see our compatriots abroad contribute, through their political actions, to an open, cohesive Switzerland to which I, as Foreign Minister, devote my daily tasks.

Interview: Gabrielle Keller

Translated from German