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National Day celebrations on the Rütli: the highpoint. At the end of her one-year tenure as the Swiss president, National Councillor Micheline Calmy-Rey says that chairing government meetings was her toughest task. By contrast, she describes the 1 August celebrations on the Rütli as a highpoint. And the outgoing president hopes the Swiss abroad will continue to get involved in shaping the future of Switzerland. Interview by Heinz Eckert

“SWISS REVIEW”: *Have you fulfilled your aims as federal president? Were you able to engage with the general public as you wanted?*

MICHELINE CALMY-REY: The first task of the federal president is to chair the meetings of the Federal Council and ensure the necessary decisions are taken. My objective was to give each member of the government sufficient leeway to express his or her opinions. I took great pains and care to ensure this was possible – successfully, I believe. The Federal Council discusses matters very directly and without pulling punches. But it also takes decisions. In addition, I treated the presidency as an opportunity to enter into a direct relationship with the Swiss people. I took part in public debates throughout the country and found that people everywhere were interested in such a dialogue.

What were the highlights of your presidency?

One highpoint was certainly the 1 August celebrations on the Rütli, which finally took place following a fair amount of traditional Swiss toing and froing. I insisted that our National Day be celebrated on the Rütli, one of our few national symbols, and I received much positive feedback on that from the public. I'm pleased to note just how many people in our country see the Rütli as more than just any old field. The other highlights of my presidency included the meetings with the people. Chairing Federal Council meetings was the toughest part.

You also attended the Congress of the Swiss Abroad in Geneva. What impression did that leave you with?

My impression is that the Swiss abroad want to get involved in Swiss affairs, particularly through involvement in our democratic institutions. For the first time ever, more than 100,000 of them took part in a general election. I appreciate this dedication, which is by no means taken for granted.



Micheline Calmy-Rey with National Council President Christine Egerszegi on the Rütli.

What conclusions do you draw from your year as federal president?

Our system of direct democracy can only function properly if citizens actively participate in it and our Swiss political dialogues address all the issues at hand. My conclusion at the end of my year as federal president is that this continues to be the case. We are currently facing a great challenge, namely to preserve our cohesion as a country of many cultures confronted with the new rules of globalisation. We can succeed if we remember the principles that made Switzerland strong in the past: respect for minorities, equality and the will to cooperate come what may.

Do you believe that your decision regarding the 1 August celebrations on the Rütli will have a lasting effect?

I hope that I have made people more aware of the importance of our basic rights. The right to congregate and freedom of speech and expression are cornerstones of our democracy. We must work to preserve them, even if it would sometimes be easier not to exercise such rights. Issues such as these must not be avoided.

Public opinion polls show that you are one of the most popular members of the government. What do you attribute this to?

Perhaps I receive a lot of recognition and approval specifically because I don't set out to do well in the opinion polls. I don't mince my words, I do what I consider to be right, and I put all my effort into my work.

What are your most important aims and desires for the coming year?

The foreign minister has to defend Swiss interests abroad. My aim remains to do this as best I can. As a neutral country without any dreams of grandeur or alliances to cater to, we enjoy a very credible reputation internationally. But we are not alone. We must be heard, seek cooperation with like-minded peoples, and be active. We mustn't sit back in the hope that the rest of the world will always see us as a shining example, nor should we hide our light under a bushel.

In what areas should Switzerland get more involved?

In promoting peace because it is in keeping with our tradition as a neutral country. I also think that we should increase our share of public development aid, where we lag behind considerably. I say this not only for moralistic reasons: I believe that we have a duty to assist people in need, in war-torn areas or in poverty. It is also good for promoting our interests. Greater involvement in peacekeeping and tackling poverty would mean less instability and fewer crises and therefore less heartache for everyone, Switzerland included: fewer refugees flooding into our country and elsewhere and better opportunities for our companies. That is in Switzerland's interests.

Do you have any special requests of the Swiss abroad?

I hope that our fellow citizens living abroad recognise that an active, credible Switzerland can also be in their interests. And I hope that the Swiss abroad will continue to help shape our country.