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Maurer: "Now I have the dream job in politics"

As head of the Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, Federal Councillor Ueli Maurer is in charge of not just the largest but probably also the most difficult department in the Federal Palace. At the top of his list of problems is a shortage of money to equip the army so it can do its job properly. But what is that job anyway, critics of the military want to know. Ueli Maurer talks to "Swiss Review" about his first year in office. Interview by Heinz Eckert



Speaking at the Foire du Valais in Martigny: Federal Councillor Maurer enjoys public appearances and likes meeting members of the public.

"SWISS REVIEW": Has your life changed a lot since being elected to the Federal Council?

FEDERAL COUNCILLOR UELI MAURER: When I was President of the SVP (Swiss People's Party), I was already involved in a whole range of issues and I was constantly exposed to public scrutiny. As a member of the national government I have to deal with matters in more depth. Now, of course, I spend a great deal of time in my office in the Federal Palace and live near Berne during the week. Politics has always fascinated me, and now I have a dream job in politics.

What was the biggest change?

I have my own staff and a large secretariat, who all assist me. I head a department of around 12,000 people and I hold political responsibility for an army of 120,000 active personnel. The scope of the job is entirely different from anything I have done

before. As a member of the national government I am also involved in the affairs of the other six departments.

Is the job different from how you imagined it?

As a Member of Parliament and Party President I was in close contact with the various heads of the DDPS for years. So I had a fairly good idea of what awaited me.

As head of the Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport, you are in charge of a large and complex department. What are the most urgent problems facing you at the moment?

There are no major problems with the Civil Protection and Sport sectors of the department. But the Defence sector is certainly a challenge. In recent years, our militia army has had to cope with too many reforms in too short a time and military

budgets have been slashed. We now face major problems in logistics and IT, and we are only in a position to fully equip one entire brigade. We are currently undergoing a process of consolidation and correction. In some areas it will take several years to get the army into shape. But I am confident we will succeed.

Does that include the oft-heard demand for greater attention to discipline again in the army?

Discipline is absolutely essential to any army. Unfortunately, we can't take it for granted the way we once could, because it's less apparent in civilian life too. Changes in society have a very rapid effect on a militia army. Running a disciplined force is one of the topmost priorities of the Chief of the Armed Forces.

The armed forces cost a lot of money, and the federal government wants to cut costs. How can these two aims be reconciled?

"A lot of money" is relative. Today the army costs Switzerland less than 1% of GNP. Other comparable countries spend more. Politicians and people in general need to have a clear idea of how much security is worth to us. To achieve the improvements I mentioned before we need an extra CHF 500 million per year.

What will the future Swiss army be like?

Different according to circumstances. By that I mean that it must constantly adapt to the changing challenges. Nobody knows today what the security situation will be like 15 or 30 years from now. But what we do know is that it is essential to have good training, modern equipment and the ability to use it, and above all a positive and motivated attitude among citizens in uniform.

What new tasks will fall to the army?

The question we have to ask is: What problems might affect our country? Water issues, migration patterns, energy shortages? We expect to get answers to this question in the new Security Policy Report to be published next autumn.

Will Switzerland always have a militia army? Why not a professional army?

I can't predict what the situation will be like in 20 years. But at the present time and

in the foreseeable future, the benefits of a militia army are obvious. It is ingrained in our population, because people from all parts of the country and all social backgrounds come together for a few weeks every year, wear the uniform and serve their country. When army personnel aren't needed, then they are at home or doing a civilian job. And when they are needed, we can mobilise tens of thousands in a very short time. A professional army is not only much more expensive, its personnel would also be recruited from just a few walks of life. And how could we keep a professional army occupied all year round?

How much support is there for the army among the Swiss population? Does Switzerland still want its armed forces?

Without a shadow of a doubt. The annual security surveys carried out by ETH Zurich show that around 75% of Swiss people believe our army to be necessary. Whenever the army presents itself to the public, for example at trade fairs or Army Days, thousands of people turn up to find out more about it.

How serious are the cadre recruitment problems?

No more serious than before. On the contrary, the take-up of cadre training is very good. Many employers in trade, commerce and business are willing to send their people to military training because they know it will make them more valuable employees.

What can be done about the growing number of young Swiss who are unfit for military service? Is this a major problem?

Once again, it's a reflection of society as a whole. If people don't get into the exercise habit when they're young, if they're overweight or addicted to smoking, then that's how they'll be when they show up for recruitment. And they'll have problems keeping up during their basic training. I want to see a fitter population in general, and then we would have a fitter army.

There is often debate about the Swiss army being sent on missions abroad. What are your views?

Foreign peacekeeping and disaster relief missions are among the tasks assigned to the army by politicians and the people. But peacekeeping missions in particular cause

controversy and therefore have a negative impact on the army debate. Personally, I am not against foreign deployments. But I would like to see our forces offer abroad something typically Swiss: a 'niche' service that is identified with our country, such as water specialists. A working group is drawing up a set of proposals for me that will also form part of the Security Policy Report.

What is the atmosphere like in the Federal Council? Is it how you imagined it? You often

would have my doubts as to the possible role of the media.

You often hear that Federal Councillors work 14 hours a day or more. Is this true? If so, is it healthy? Is it even possible to focus and work efficiently for this amount of time?

I very often work those kinds of hours. But I don't see it as a chore. I love the work and I love coming into contact with lots of different people, which is why I often at-



The head of the Department of Defence, Civil Protection and Sport meeting troops with Brigadier Daniel Berger. Federal Councillor Maurer is in charge of the largest department in the Federal Palace.

read that the Federal Council is no longer a group of colleagues, but of individuals fighting for themselves. Would you agree?

Parliament elects seven 'alpha animals' to government and these individuals have to work together to get the best outcome for our country. These seven individuals don't have to be friends. But they do have to be colleagues. In my experience the Federal Council functions more smoothly and harmoniously than is often portrayed in the media. We debate and sometimes we argue about the best solution. After a meeting we traditionally have a meal together.

What do you think of the idea of direct election of the Federal Council by the people?

In many ways the idea is an attractive one, but politically it is probably unrealistic. We would risk permanent electioneering and I

tend smaller meetings too. I'm lucky enough to be healthy and require little sleep. And I get plenty of exercise, mostly cycling, and cross-country skiing in winter.

Do we need a state reform or just more Federal Councillors?

No, I would say fewer. I think we could manage with just five Federal Councillors. The workload would have to be distributed differently.

When will your family be moving nearer to the Federal Palace?

My wife and younger children still live in the Zurich Oberland. They have strong personal ties there. Our oldest children have left home and one of our sons lives in Norway. I have a nice apartment near Berne and I spend the weekends at home with my family.