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“I love discovering new countries”

Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter became the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the start of the year and is therefore a figure of great interest to the Swiss abroad. In an interview, he tells us about his relationship with the world abroad, outlines the challenges facing Switzerland, explains his negotiation tactics with the EU and reveals what he reads at bedtime.

Interview by Barbara Engel

“SWISS REVIEW”: Federal Councillor, you moved to the Department of Foreign Affairs at the start of 2012 after just two years as head of the Department of Home Affairs. What were your reasons for switching to the FDFA?

DIDIER BURKHALTER: The Federal Council believes that, in its current makeup and with the current distribution of departments, it has formed a good team to represent the interests and values of Switzerland abroad. I have been interested in Swiss foreign policy ever since I entered federal politics. I was a member of the Security Committee for several years, which deals with foreign policy issues among other things. I firmly believe that Switzerland can play an important role on the international stage. The presidency of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in 2014 will give us the opportunity to further develop one of the main strategies of our foreign policy – commitment to promoting stability in Europe and its neighbouring regions. We anticipate major challenges in European policy over the coming years.

You have spent your entire professional career in politics. What would be your dream job outside politics?

That is something I haven't really considered. But if I had several lives, I would like to have been a writer and a reporter – I could then have really let my imagination run free. But a dream job would have to be a career I could share with my wife.

When the party asked you to stand for election to the Federal Council in 2009 did you have any doubts about whether this was the right move?

Anyone asked to stand for the Federal Council must consider the potential impact on their own life and that of their family.

You have to ask yourself what you can offer your country and its people. I reflected upon this and decided to take up the challenge. Once the decision has been made, there is no room for doubts. Though you should always remain humble.

You give travelling as one of your interests on your official CV. Which country would be your dream destination for a private trip?

It's true. I love discovering new countries, their landscapes, peoples, mentalities and cultures. I think I've got a good feel for differences. While there are many places I like, I really enjoy visiting Brittany, especially for its wildness. The power of the ocean puts everything into perspective. I also like spending time on Lake Neuchâtel. It is much smaller but still very impressive. I don't actually believe that dream destinations exist. The important thing is being happy whether it's here or elsewhere.

And where do you holiday now that you're a Federal Councillor?

Mainly in Switzerland and Austria, which is where my wife is from. This is a country I like very much. Switzerland and Austria have a lot in common, which is why relations between the two countries are so good. As Austria has pursued a different path to Switzerland in terms of European integration, it is important that we maintain good relations with Vienna – Austria is a good advocate for our interests in the EU.

Around 700 000 Swiss citizens abroad see you as the chief patron of the Swiss community abroad. Have you ever been a Swiss citizen abroad yourself?

No, but the travel involved in my new position will provide me with the opportunity

to gain a better insight into the issues important to the Swiss abroad.

You visited the Swiss school in Brazil two years ago as the Minister of Home Affairs and appeared very impressed.

Simply being around children brings me lots of joy. I was really impressed by the visit to the Swiss school in São Paulo. My delegation, my wife and I were given a fantastic reception there. I think the Swiss schools abroad can be seen as a kind of instrument of our foreign policy. Although many of the pupils do not hold a Swiss passport, they discover our country and culture there. I have no doubt that this experience shapes their lives and their perception of Switzerland.

One of the most important areas of Swiss foreign policy is EU relations. Brussels believes that certain rules must apply equally to everyone in the EU single market. This will require pragmatic discussions within Swiss political circles. How do you hope to achieve that?



PROFILE

Didier Burkhalter was born in Neuchâtel on 17 April 1960. After secondary school, he studied Economics in his home town. In 1991, he was elected onto the city of Neuchâtel's executive body as an FDP representative. He was the city president three times (1994, 1998, 2001). On 16 September 2009, the Federal Assembly elected him as Pascal Couchepin's successor on the Federal Council. He ran the Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) from November 2009 until the end of 2011. On 1 January 2012, he moved to the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) as Micheline Calmy-Rey's successor. Didier Burkhalter is married and has three grown-up sons.

Federal Councillor Burkhalter with his wife Friedrun at last year's Zurich film festival

You said it yourself, through pragmatic discussions. The Federal Council wants to define a roadmap together with the EU to find solutions to unresolved issues that are acceptable to both parties. The priority is electricity and energy as negotiations are at a very advanced stage here. The Federal Council is also seeking solutions within this framework to the so-called institutional issues. These include the issue of adjusting the bilateral agreements to developments in EU law. The Federal Council does not wish to conduct discussions on institutional issues abstractly but rather specifically using the electricity/energy dossier. I am sure discussions can be conducted purposely by adopting this approach and that the interests of both sides can be harmonised. Any automatic adoption of laws is certainly out of the question for the Federal Council.

Do you have a timeframe in mind or could the negotiations take years?

Time requirements and deadlines can never be accurately predicted during negotiations. We clearly want to come to an agreement with the EU on the next steps

as quickly as possible. That is why we set out Switzerland's position in a letter to the EU shortly after the Federal Council resolution.

The Swiss abroad would like to see a federal law on Swiss citizens abroad because responsibility for the various sub-areas that affect them is spread across all the departments. A parliamentary initiative for such a law has been signed by 31 Council of States members. Are you in favour of such a law?

Yes, I support a law for the Swiss abroad. It could lay the foundations for an integral policy on the Swiss abroad whereby one department would take overall control. The FDFA has long recognised the need for action in this respect. It is for this reason that last year it created the Consular Directorate, which includes a helpline, among other things. Further steps in this direction are currently being examined.

In view of the constant increase in the number of Swiss abroad, the Federal Council stated in a report in 2010 that it was time to formulate a uniform, coherent policy on the Swiss

abroad. What do you consider to be the priorities for such a policy?

As far as I am concerned, it is primarily about understanding the concerns and needs of Swiss citizens living abroad. Only by doing so can the Federal Council draw up a coherent policy that takes account of their requirements. The existing draft law contains some interesting proposals, such as systematically taking advantage of the network of relationships between the Swiss abroad to raise Switzerland's profile internationally.

The cost-cutting measures affecting consular services caused outrage among the Swiss abroad last year. Are further cost-cutting measures and consulate closures – which is what concerns people most – on the agenda?

Yes, but the concentration of consular services into Regional Centres allows us to release funding for other requirements, such as the new representations in Doha and Bangalore. (Editorial note: details on the closure of consulates on page 28)

As the Minister of Home Affairs you were also responsible for culture. What music do you most enjoy listening to?

I like songs with an authentic sound which convey a sense that they are relating something experienced. Bruce Springsteen's songs have been among my favourites for years, in particular the track “The River”. I also like soundtracks, music that paints pictures without needing a screen.

And what book is currently on your bedside table?

You are very inquisitive! But just this once I'll answer your question: a thriller by David Baldacci and “Conversations with Myself” by Nelson Mandela. “The Art of War” by Sun Tzu, a book that provides valuable insights into the avoidance of conflict, is also always within easy reach. And various reports on forthcoming Federal Council meetings are always there.

The interview was conducted in writing.

BARBARA ENGEL is Editor-in-Chief at “Swiss Review”