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Autor: Engel, Barbara / Goetschel, Laurent
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"A clear statement has been made"

Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter set out the priorities in foreign policy for the next four years at the beginning of March. Laurent Goetschel, Professor of Political Science at the University of Basel and Director of the peace research institute swisspeace in Berne, believes the new strategy has logic but lacks vision.

Interview by Barbara Engel

"SWISS REVIEW": After the presentation of the foreign policy objectives, the Swiss media talked of a fundamental change in foreign policy. Do you see it that way too?

LAURENT GOETSCHEL: It hardly constitutes a fundamental change in terms of substance. The priorities remain Europe, development cooperation, peace-building, the environment, international law, neutrality, the financial centre and trade. What has changed is the order of priority. Neighbouring countries are now the main focus, followed by Europe and then the rest of the world. There is a definite emphasis on areas closer to home.

What do you believe is the reason for this shift of emphasis?

There are currently several key issues to be resolved with our immediate neighbours. These include the bilateral tax agreements with individual states as well as institutional problems with the European Union. And we also have issues such as Zurich airport and the debate about the free movement of persons.

So, you see the priorities as logical?

There are no surprises?

Let's put it like this, I can understand why these priorities have been set. Reading the report you also sense that a clear statement has been made. This may have been a personal message from Federal Councillor Burkhalter to his predecessor Micheline Calmy-Rey. Issues that were very important to her, such as international cooperation and peace-building, are still among the priorities but they have fallen down the pecking order.

Federal Councillor Burkhalter has presented his priorities after just two months in office. Can we therefore conclude that the priorities contained in the report are primarily those that the diplomats at the FDFA consider appropriate and important? Could they be objectives that they



Laurent Goetschel

were unable to implement under Federal Councillor Calmy-Rey?

There are many diplomats working at the FDFA who also have many different leanings and viewpoints. From what I have seen, many of them were pleased with the commitment shown by Federal Councillor Calmy-Rey, even if she sometimes tended towards activism. I regard the new set of priorities more as the consequence of criticism from outside the department, from politicians and the business world.

One of Federal Councillor Burkhalter's main foreign policy objectives is apparently to support the Swiss abroad. Do you have any idea what this might mean?

That's not an easy question to answer. It is obviously important to the 700,000 or so Swiss abroad that they are not forgotten in Berne. Or better still that they are actively taken into consideration. Numerically, they are Switzerland's most important representatives and are only too readily called 'ambassadors'. Although I am not a Swiss abroad, I constantly find that the perception of Switzerland abroad is shaped primarily by people and individuals. The Swiss abroad are therefore very much an advertisement for Switzerland and important to the image of the country. It's commendable that the Foreign Minister is aware of that. What this means for the

Swiss abroad in terms of federal government services is another matter. This covers many very different areas, including the consular service, social insurance, tax issues and electoral participation. The Department of Foreign Affairs is not solely responsible for these.

Are there objectives missing from the foreign policy priorities that should have been included in your view?

I don't think anything major was left out. But for years now these reports have been drafted in such a way that nobody could object to them. That's also the case here. It is more about listing all sorts of endeavours rather than setting out clear objectives. However, the government ought to and really needs to develop new visions again, particularly in the field of EU relations, which really are a priority right now. This is actually part of the executive mandate. The constant pledge to 'focus on the bilateral approach' is inadequate. But perhaps it was simply too early for that.

You have been observing Swiss foreign policy for many years. Has Switzerland's position in the world become more difficult? Has our image been tarnished?

I would say our image has become more multi-layered. Whereas we were primarily seen in the past as a pretty, likeable nation, we now have more facets. To give you an example, people were aware twenty years ago that Swiss banks were a sanctuary for money from dubious sources. This is simply viewed and judged differently today. So, pressure is now being exerted to make Switzerland adhere to certain rules. I don't believe Switzerland's image has really been damaged. It is still regarded as an upright state and a country where people would like to live.