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Almost everything is as it was in the Federal Council

Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf was confirmed in office, and the Swiss People's Party failed to obtain a second seat as the party with the largest number of votes. Alain Berset replaced Micheline Calmy-Rey, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs.
By René Lenzin

The party political composition of national government is unchanged – the Swiss Social Democratic Party (SP) and the FDP. The Liberals each hold two seats; the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP), the Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the Conservative Democratic Party (BDP) each have one. The United Federal Assembly re-elected all the Federal Councillors who stood for office again at the general election on 14 December. In the order in which they were elected, these are: Doris Leuthard (CVP), Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf (BDP), Ueli Maurer (SVP), Didier Burkhalter (FDP), Simonetta Sommaruga (SP) and Johann Schneider-Ammann (FDP). Alain Berset, the Social Democrat from Fribourg, replaced his party colleague Micheline Calmy-Rey, who stepped down at the end of 2011. The Federal Chancellor, Corina Casanova (CVP), was also confirmed in office.

The clear winner in this election is Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf. Four years ago, she was elected to national government when still an SVP politician in place of Christoph Blocher, against the will of her party. After her expulsion from the SVP, she joined the newly formed BDP, which had little chance of securing a seat on the Federal Council with its 5% share of the vote. With the help of the SP, CVP, Greens (GPS) and Green Liberals (GLP), Widmer-Schlumpf was nevertheless comfortably re-elected to office in the first round of voting.

The second winner is Johann Schneider-Ammann. The Free Democrat from Berne, only elected a year ago, was regarded as an outside candidate because his party lost votes in the National Council elections and looked unlikely to win two seats. Finally, the SP can also be satisfied with the outcome after masterfully managing the succession of Micheline Calmy-Rey and easily holding both its seats.

Will the SVP go into opposition?

The main loser is the SVP. As the party with the largest number of votes by some margin, it had the strongest claim

to two Federal Council seats and no one apart from the Greens disputed this. Its attack on Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf nevertheless failed. Its candidates, Jean-François Rime and Hansjörg Walter, had no chance against the politician from Grisons. It received support from the FDP, but the two parties together still only have around 100 seats in the 246-strong Federal Assembly. And when the SVP with Rime came up against the FDP and SP it lost out again.

The party leadership clearly sees this outcome as an infringement of the system of concordance. It will ask the party base how it should respond at a meeting of delegates in January. Possible scenarios include Ueli Maurer stepping down from the Federal Council and going into opposition. Or they could remain in national government and pursue a policy of "half government and half opposition" as long as the demand for a second seat remains unmet.

The SVP will have to put this defeat down to itself to a large extent. It took a long time over its search for a suitable candidate for the Federal Council position. It had only just selected the Zurich National Councillor Bruno Zuppiger as its candidate when he was forced to withdraw owing to his involvement in a shady inheritance affair. The SVP also refused to stand against the FDP until election day, despite the fact that these two parties could hardly expect to win four of seven seats with a 42% share of the vote.

However, the main reason for the SVP's failure is the centre-left coalition that elected Widmer-Schlumpf four years ago and now returned her to office. Although this coalition has a clear majority in the Federal Assembly, it made no serious move for the SVP to obtain a second seat at the expense of the FDP against its will. The desire to elect Widmer-Schlumpf and to weaken the SVP was ultimately stronger than the general commitment to the system of concordance.

The result is a government that will be able to work well together in terms of

personalities. How interaction with Parliament and an SVP that is half in opposition will work remains to be seen.

Allocation of ministries

Following her comfortable re-election, Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf was also the overwhelmingly popular choice for Swiss President for this year. Ueli Maurer is the Vice-President. Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter is the new Head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). Since his election to the Federal Council in 2009, the Free Democrat from Neuchâtel had directed the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA). The FDHA is now headed by Alain Berset. The other five Federal Councillors will continue in the same departments they directed before the elections.



Alain Berset in his first media appearance as a Federal Councillor

A young star with a meteoric career

39-year-old Alain Berset, the former Council of States member for Fribourg, is one of Switzerland's youngest Federal Councillors.
By René Lenzin

Alain Berset does not like to give away any secrets. At least this is the impression he gave in his interviews as a Federal Council candidate. He evaded the most tenacious interviewers by making vague and general statements. In his first interviews after the election, he again did not wish to comment specifically on his priorities in his future government role either. He told the media that he would initially have to integrate into the team and find out which department he would be taking over. He gave a polished performance but remained rather elusive as a person and as a politician.

When confronted with this perception, Berset told the Tages-Anzeiger: "I represent our social democratic positions with conviction and commitment." He is in fact highly esteemed within his party and hardly ever takes up a position at odds with the party line. The man from Fribourg is also seen as a bridge-builder and consensus-oriented politician who is also well regarded by most politicians in the conservative parties. These are typical qualities often attributed to Council of States members and generally represent a solid foundation for a term in government. Berset's detractors do not level their criticisms at his ability to operate in a

consensual manner, but rather at his lack of executive experience. He claims he was previously a freelance strategy and communications consultant. In fact, he was already a professional politician before joining national government.

The 39-year-old Social Democrat is one of the youngest Federal Councillors in the history of the federal state. He is the youngest member of the current government by some margin. Berset has enjoyed a meteoric rise in his political career. He spent three years on the communal parliament in Belfaux where he lives and was a member of Fribourg's Constitutional Council for four years before the electorate in his canton voted him onto the Council of States in 2003. He was comfortably re-elected four years later and also eight years later. In 2009, he became President of the smaller chamber. He has been the Vice-President of the SP faction in the Federal Palace since 2005. In this capacity, he apparently played a major role in the de-selection of Christoph Blocher in December 2007. A graduate in politics and economics, he is married and has three children aged four, six and eight. As a jazz pianist he once undertook part of a tour of Latin America and was junior champion in middle-distance running in French-speaking Switzerland.

Difficult tasks at the FDHA

Alain Berset overcame the former National Councillor and current member of the Cantonal Council of Vaud, Pierre-Yves Maillard. He achieved a surprisingly clear victory over his rival in the first round of voting and overcame the hurdle of the absolute majority in the second round. He is replacing his party colleague Micheline Calmy-Rey on the Federal Council. However, he has not taken over the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs from her, instead becoming Head of the Department of Home Affairs (FDHA). Difficult tasks await him there: he will have to attend to the blocked reforms of both health and social insurances schemes, which have been the subject of heated political debate for years.

SOCIAL DEMOCRATS WIN COUNCIL OF STATES ELECTION

Only 27 of the 46 seats on the Council of States were filled after the election on 23 October 2011. A second round of voting was subsequently held in 13 cantons.

- The Social Democratic Party (SP) emerged as the winner. It increased its number of seats by two compared to 2007. If the seat in Berne, which was lost in the interim period, is also included, the total gain is in fact three seats. With 11 seats, the SP is stronger than ever before.
- The parties previously dominant in the chamber of cantonal representatives, the Christian Democrats (CVP) and the FDP. The Liberals, now only have half the Council of States members. The CVP lost three of its 15 seats and the FDP one of its 12.
- The major offensive on the Council of States by the Swiss People's Party (SVP) clearly failed. It has one seat fewer than four years ago. If the Berne seat, which was lost just a few months after the election, is also counted, the number of seats lost is two.
- The number of parties in the Council of States has increased. The Greens (GPS) and Green Liberals (GLP) each hold two seats and the BDP one. With Thomas Minder, the politician behind the so-called "Initiative against rip-off salaries", an independent member has also entered the smaller chamber. He has joined the SVP faction but wants to remain independent.

DISTRIBUTION OF SEATS IN 2011, BY PARTY

Change compared to 2007 in brackets

