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Swiss President in year of destiny

Minister of Foreign Affairs Didier Burkhalter is Swiss President in a crucial year for Switzerland. Responsible for policy on Europe, probably the government's thorniest issue, he must put relations with the European Union on a new footing.

By Jürg Müller

Changes of direction in the Swiss Presidency, which rotates annually, are rarely as glaringly obvious as on this occasion. Defence Minister Ueli Maurer constantly played on variations of the theme of "David versus Goliath", little Switzerland against the world's major powers, in his presidential appearances. By contrast, Didier Burkhalter has adopted the maxim of "Switzerland and the world" for his presidential year during which he aims to focus particular attention on opening up Switzerland's outlook.

Openness is hardly what the Free Democrat from Neuchâtel, elected Swiss President in impressive style, is known for. He is regarded as an introvert and does not seek the big stage. He will nevertheless appear in the spotlight more than any other Federal Councillor in 2014. This is not just because he will represent Switzerland to the outside world, but also because he will take over the presidency of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) at the same time.

Burkhalter is also responsible for the government's most contentious policy area, namely relations with Europe, and he has set himself ambitious targets here. He intends to put relations with the EU on a new footing this year. He will not only have to overcome foreign policy pitfalls but also political obstacles domestically. Even Burkhalter himself is calling it a "year of destiny". Burkhalter has focused on Europe in his foreign policy at a much earlier stage than his predecessor, Micheline Calmy-Rey. He has placed a greater emphasis on neighbouring countries and is attempting to create a more favourable climate for Switzerland in Brussels through closer relations with individual EU member states.

Didier Burkhalter, born in 1960, was elected to national government as Pascal Couchepin's successor in 2009, taking over the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA) from him. After Minister of Foreign Affairs Calmy-Rey stepped down, he became head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA). Burkhalter was elected as a member of Neuchâtel's municipal government at the age of just 31 and served there until 2005. He became a National Councillor in 2003 and a Council of States member in 2007. He has three adult sons.

Lustenberger and Germann elected Presidents

Christian Democrat Ruedi Lustenberger (1950, pictured left) was elected President of the National Council at the beginning of the last win-

ter session. Formally Switzerland's highest office holder, he comes from Entlebuch and is seen as an affable figure. Lustenberger, a mas-

ter carpenter and father of five adult children, has sat on the National Council since 1999. He belongs to the conservative wing of the Christian Democratic People's Party (CVP) politically but is regarded in many quarters as a bridge-builder between different factions.

Hannes Germann of the Swiss People's Party (SVP), born in 1956, who is the new President of the Council of States, has also gained a reputation as a consensus politician. The primary school teacher, economist and business journalist from the canton of Schaffhausen is also President of the Association of Swiss Communes.

