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Behind the scenes of Swiss government – the Federal Chancellery

On 1 January 2016, the former Federal Chancellor Corina Casanova handed over the post to Walter Thurnherr, who was elected to the office on 9 December by the Federal Assembly. Reviewing the performance of the politician from Grisons provides an opportunity to discover or re-discover the wide-ranging and often little-known activities of Swiss government's staff office.

For eight years, Corina Casanova advised and supported members of the Federal Council in performing their duties, demonstrating great commitment and consideration. Hers was a painstaking task, deliberately performed out of the spotlight, primarily aimed at alleviating the huge workload of Swiss ministers, who are required to take over 2,500 governmental decisions each year.

Major reform

But the close to perfect discretion of the lawyer from Grisons does not mean Corina Casanova has not left her mark during her two terms in charge of the Federal Chancellery. Not least thanks to new powers granted to her by Parliament to support government action, she has been able to carry out major reforms concerning both the organisation of the sessions and the management of Federal Council affairs. At the same time, significant progress has also been made in the process of digitalising the services of the executive, the Federal Administration and the Federal Chancellery. In particular these include the electronic management of all Federal Council affairs, introduced in 2012, the establishment of the primacy of the electronic versions of official publications from 1 January 2016 and the continual support provided to the cantons with the gradual introduction of electronic voting which is so important to the Swiss Abroad. Under her leadership, the Federal Chancellery has established a presidential service aimed at providing advice and support for the activities of the President of the Swiss Confederation and giving this office a certain degree of continuity over the course of time.



Communication and multilingualism

Corina Casanova is even credited with modernising government communication by developing websites (admin.ch and ch.ch) and social media channels which enable more direct and less formal contact with the Swiss people.

Communication is nevertheless also based on reciprocal understanding and knowledge of the various national languages. Originally from Ilanz in canton Grisons, the former Chancellor speaks six languages and has always been eager to promote Switzerland's four languages. She decided to create a part-time position for a translator for Romansh, her mother tongue, at the Federal Chancellery. Important documents, such as federal voting instructions and the guide to the National Council elections, are published in the four national languages. An awareness of and proactive commitment to languages have earned her prizes for bilingualism and multilingualism from the Bilingualism Forum and an award from the regional society SRG SSR Svisra Rumantscha in 2013.

Duties of the Chancellery

The Federal Chancellery is a complex organisation whose duties are very wide-ranging but little known to the wider public. To fulfill these duties, the Federal Chancellor relies on the support of around 250 staff, most of whom are based in Berne.

As the staff office of the Swiss government, the Federal Chancellery is responsible for preparing sessions and communicating Federal Council decisions as well as planning and coordinating government activities. In contrast to other countries, the Federal Chancellor in Switzerland primarily performs administrative duties. Despite taking part in the sessions of the governing body and being able to

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put forward proposals on items being addressed, the Chancellor is not entitled to vote. In addition to its governmental duties and decisions, the Federal Chancellery provides the public with information through a series of publications ranging from compilations of federal legislation and the Official Gazette to various brochures illustrating the organisation of the state and how it works. One of these – “The Swiss Confederation – a Brief Guide” – has one of the highest circulations of the Federal Administration’s publications (just under 300,000 copies a year).

Guarantor of political rights and languages

In virtually no other country is the democratic participation of the people as extensive as in the Swiss Confederation. With elections, votes, initiatives and referenda, Swiss citizens are regularly called to the ballot box to express their views on the nation’s future. The Chancellery performs a key role in this respect. It is responsible for informing the Swiss people about federal issues being put to the vote, publishing ballot results and organising the National Council elections. The custodian not just of political rights but also of languages, it is the Federal Chancellery’s task to ensure that laws, ordinances and international treaties are drawn up in a simple and comprehensible way in the three official languages as well as in Romansh and English from time to time.



The new Federal Chancellor – a foreign policy expert

Walter Thurnherr became Federal Chancellor at the beginning of the year. As a diplomat and former head of the Service for the Swiss Abroad, he has a close insight into foreign policy and connection to the Swiss Abroad. After graduating in

theoretical physics, he embarked upon a career in the diplomatic service in 1989 working in Moscow, New York and Berne. Flavio Cotti, the former head of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), appointed him as his personal assistant in 1997. Walter Thurnherr became deputy head of the FDFA’s Political Affairs Division VI in 1999 and was then appointed its head in 2000. From 2002 to 2015 he was Secretary General at three departments, most recently the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications (DETEC).

The newly elected Federal Chancellor Walter Thurnherr faces a wide range of challenges. When handing over the baton, Corina Casanova indicated she was confident that she was leaving behind a robust institution capable of keeping pace with the times.

Federal referenda

The Federal Council determines the text of the proposals at least four months before the voting date.

Voting dates in 2016: 28 February, 5 June, 25 September and 27 November

All information on the proposals (explanatory pamphlets, committees, recommendations of Parliament and the Federal Council, electronic voting, etc.) can be found at www.admin.ch/votes.

Popular initiatives

The following new federal popular initiative had been launched at the time of going to press (deadline for the collection of signatures in brackets): Initiative “Ja zur Bewegungsmedizin” (Yes to medicine of movement) – (22/06/2017).

The list of pending popular initiatives can be found at www.bk.admin.ch – Aktuell – Wahlen und Abstimmungen – Hängige Volksinitiativen

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