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Autor: Brotschi, Markus
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Left mourns Burkhalter's departure more than his own party

The resignation of Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter surprised even his own party, the FDP.

It's still not clear whether the Federal Councillor from Neuchâtel is leaving for personal or political reasons.

MARKUS BROTSCHI

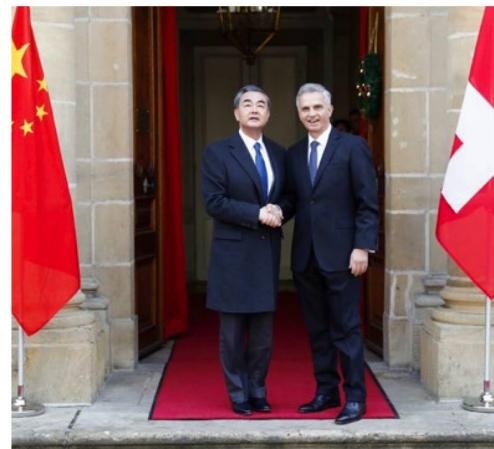
On 31 October, Didier Burkhalter will hand over the reins of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) to his successor – exactly eight years to the day since he first took office. But it remains to be seen whether he will then return to private life or accept a position with some international organisation. Announcing his departure, Burkhalter expressed the wish to regain a little freedom after almost 30 years in politics. The 57-year-old said being a Federal Councillor was so demanding that he felt consumed by it.

However, most parliamentarians – including in Burkhalter's own party, the FDP – are convinced he resigned for different reasons. They think his European dossier had become a dead-end. After all, Burkhalter has for years doggedly pursued the aim of concluding a framework agreement with the European Union on institutional links with Switzerland. However, as a consequence of resistance from the SVP, such a framework agreement had begun to lose support within the FDP and CVP. Burkhalter faced ever louder claims that he was blind to reality and that such a treaty would be rejected were it put to a referendum. "Didier Burkhalter was allowed to work towards an institutional framework agreement even though this endeavour had not been capable of achieving majority support for some time," Ignazio Cassis, the head of the FDP parliamentary group and Burkhalter's possible successor on the Federal Council, said on the day of the resignation. Cassis believes the Federal Council was mainly to blame for this, and he called Burkhalter's resignation "evidence of a statesmanlike attitude".

Consensus-builder

Burkhalter vehemently denied that his decision was based on a lack of support for his policies. He must have been pleased that the entire Federal Council largely stuck to its existing course at a closed-door meeting on European policy shortly after he announced his departure. It was an expression of precisely the policy Burkhalter had pursued throughout his term in office: that the Federal Council should present itself as a collegial body and that everyone should seek consensus at the committee level rather than block the efforts of individual members. However, some of his party colleagues in German-speaking Switzerland had wished that Burkhalter would back "conservative" policies more frequently on the Federal Council. Some accuse him of siding too often with Doris Leuthard (CVP) and the two SP representatives, thus helping produce centre-left majorities.

Representatives of the SP and the Greens deeply regretted his resignation. They praised Burkhalter as a symbol of a cosmopolitan



At home on the international stage: Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Neuchâtel in December 2016.
Photo: Keystone

Switzerland and blamed his departure on the CVP and FDP for failing to support his European policies.

International respect

Burkhalter's departure sees the resignation of a Federal Councillor who felt more at home on the international stage than in domestic politics. In 2014, he achieved international recognition for his efforts as the chairman of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). He gained further respect as a mediator in the Ukraine/Crimea conflict, where he managed to wring concessions from both sides. At one time, Burkhalter was even being touted as a future UN Secretary-General.

He was less skilled and less energetic in his first two years as the head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs (FDHA). As a result, just four months into his tenure, he suffered defeat at a referendum, when 73 % of voters rejected a proposed reduction in the second-pillar conversion rate. Burkhalter had not presented the initiative himself, having inherited it from his predecessor, Pascal Couchepin.

After only two years at the FDHA, he snatched at the first opportunity to move to the FDFA, following the resignation of Foreign Minister Micheline Calmy-Rey. Some accuse him of shirking his responsibilities. But foreign affairs undoubtedly suited the worldly Free Democrat from Neuchâtel better than tough domestic wrangling over reforms to health and pension policy.

MARKUS BROTSCHI IS A FEDERAL POLITICAL AFFAIRS EDITOR WITH THE "TAGES-ANZEIGER" AND "DER BUND"