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Alain Berset



It was a photo that raised eyebrows: Federal Councillor Alain Berset sitting on the edge of a New York sidewalk in a blue suit, nonchalantly studying his notes. The picture, taken in 2018 during the UN General Assembly, epitomises the confident, purposeful image that the Fribourg social democrat likes to project as one of the more unconventional members of the federal government.

Berset, just 51, has announced his surprise resignation from the Federal Council. He will not be running for another term after this autumn's federal elections. In his 12 years as interior minister, Berset had to deal with difficult issues like pension provision and rising healthcare costs – areas in which he made little progress. An avowed bon vivant, he rode a tidal wave of popularity for his leadership during the Covid crisis.

Berset has also been a little less than statesmanlike at times. He flew a light aircraft into French airspace without permission. He had an extramarital fling which led to a blackmail attempt against him. The interior minister was able to come through these incidents without his popularity taking a hit.

More serious are allegations that Berset's communications chief leaked confidential information to the boss of Ringier media group during the Covid crisis, as this potentially compromised public trust in the Federal Council.

Stepping down from government is now another bombshell. With Berset's government seat up for grabs in December, the Federal Council "magic formula" (2 SVP, 2 FDP, 2 SP, 1 Centre) could change if the October elections lead to a shift in the parliamentary balance of power.

JÜRGE STEINER

Zelensky addresses Swiss parliament

On 15 June 2023, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky was allowed to address the Swiss parliament via direct video link. In his short speech, Zelensky asked Switzerland to hold a peace conference. In the days leading up to Zelensky's address, pro-Russian hackers unleashed massive cyberattacks on Switzerland's IT infrastructure. The hackers targeted the websites and applications of the Federal Administration and Swiss parliament as well as the official websites of numerous Swiss cities. Just before these attacks, hackers stole information belonging to the Federal Office of Police, the Federal Office for Customs and Border Security, various cantonal police forces, and the state-owned arms manufacturer RUAG. (MUL)

Swiss negotiator with the European Union is stepping down

Livia Leu, Switzerland's chief negotiator with the European Union (EU), is stepping down at her own request to become Swiss ambassador to Germany this autumn. Leu's departure after less than three years in office comes at a delicate moment, because exploratory talks between Switzerland and the EU on a new agreement have entered an important phase. Leu is reputed to be a tenacious diplomat who knows her brief. However, her dealings with Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis have been strained of late. The job of chief negotiator has changed hands numerous times. Roberto Balzaretti, Pascale Baeriswyl, Jacques de Watteville and Yves Rossier have preceded Leu in the post over just the last ten years. (MUL)

Thomas Zurbuchen joins ETH Zurich

Swiss Thomas Zurbuchen, 55, the former head of research at NASA, the US space agency, has returned to Switzerland to work for ETH Zurich. From August 2023, he will head the ETH Zurich Space initiative as Professor of Space Science and Technology. Considered one of the world's most influential scientific researchers, Zurbuchen had a decisive influence on space science at NASA. According to the ETH Zurich President Joël Mesot, Zurbuchen "decided to join ETH Zurich despite numerous offers from top universities around the world". (MUL)

100 million from Russia for UNICEF Switzerland and Liechtenstein

UNICEF Switzerland and Liechtenstein has received a donation of 100 million Swiss francs – from dissident Russian journalist Dmitry Muratov, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021. Muratov's independent Russian newspaper "Novaya Gazeta" has had to suspend its activities amid pressure from the Russian authorities. In 2022, Muratov decided to sell his golden Nobel Prize medal at an auction in New York. He has now donated the entire proceeds to UNICEF Switzerland and Liechtenstein, an organisation providing emergency relief in Ukraine. (MUL)

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