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Alain Berset puts Switzerland on the European stage

Alain Berset is the first Swiss to become secretary general of the Council of Europe, an institution that he wishes to strengthen. Berset's appointment is also likely to enhance his home country's profile across Europe.

EVELINE RUTZ

In the heart of Europe yet somehow detached from it all – Switzerland is something of an anomaly. When European heads of government meet, the Swiss are usually absent. Surveys consistently show that the majority of the Swiss population are sceptical towards the European Union (EU). Political efforts to align more closely with the EU are not generally well received, outweighed by fears that rapprochement will endanger sovereignty and prosperity. The majority seem to be happy for Switzerland to play a bit part in European politics.

lives in a beautiful Strasbourg mansion. With over 1,800 staff and an annual budget of some 625 million Swiss francs, Berset is responsible for strategic planning and for representing the Council of Europe as an organisation. Predecessor Marija Pejcinovic Buric of Croatia was a relatively cautious general secretary, but Berset looks set to lead from the front and drive the agenda. He says he wants to bolster the organisation, which aims to protect human rights and is also home to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). Berset's appointment is also likely to im-

someone at the top of a leading organisation," she says. Switzerland is not an EU member, so this position of authority means something. In her opinion, Alain Berset has everything it takes to give the Council of Europe greater credibility.

This interpretation is widely shared. Berne's mediating role has been strengthened, says SVP politician Alfred Heer, who heads the Swiss delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) and has noticed how other members now afford him and his colleagues greater respect. "It always helps when you have a compatriot in the top job." But Heer is keen to emphasise that the secretary general has a duty to serve the Council of Europe as a whole – that means all 46 member states. He thinks that Berset coming from a non-EU country is an advantage. "With Alain Berset at the helm, I sincerely hope the Council of Europe can again play a more active role in resolving conflicts."



During a visit to Switzerland in September 2023, the secretary general of the Council of Europe, Marija Pejcinovic Buric, met the then President of the Swiss Confederation Alain Berset – who is now her successor. Photo: Keystone

It was remarkable, therefore, to see political parties unanimously pushing earlier this year for former Federal Councillor Alain Berset (SP) to become secretary general of the Council of Europe. Politicians from left to right agreed that filling this important position constituted a rare opportunity for Switzerland. Their unity paid off: Berset, who left the Federal Council at the end of 2023, started his new job on 18 September 2024. The 52-year-old now

prove Switzerland's profile across Europe. Not by bringing Swiss interests to the table, but by representing a nation that mediates in conflicts and is proud of its tradition of 'good offices'.

Switzerland's role in Europe

Helen Keller, who is a law professor and former judge at the ECtHR, believes that Switzerland will become less isolated in Europe. "We now have

Berset's priority: Ukraine

Berset has already stressed more than once that he wants to prioritise support for Ukraine. "Reparations need to be paid for the damage inflicted on Ukraine," he says. To calculate future reparation payments, the Council of Europe wishes to document the impact of the Russian invasion. Berset also wants to strengthen

Selfie time – Alain Berset meets four sumo wrestlers during a state visit to Japan in 2018.

Photo: Peter Klauzner, Keystone





the organisation as a whole. He intends to push back against media manipulation and disinformation, which has taken on a new dimension through AI. After being elected, he talked of the big responsibility he was taking on, noting that the Council of Europe was committed to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. “These are the values that make our continent stable, and we must fight for them every day.”

No stranger to the limelight

Charismatic, eloquent and self-assured, Berset is very much at ease on the international stage. A former junior 800-metres champion, the French-speaking Swiss from Fribourg was an accomplished athlete when he was younger. Single-mindedness on the running track seems to have rubbed off on his political career. Berset was elected to the Council of States in 2003, becoming the youngest member of the smaller chamber at 31. He was voted onto the Federal Council in 2011.

As head of the Federal Department of Home Affairs, Berset was notably responsible for health and social policy. He was the president of the Swiss Confederation in 2018 and 2023, representing the federal government at the highest level – and enjoying the limelight that this afforded him. From welcoming French President Emmanuel Macron to Berne on a state visit, to rubbing shoulders with Donald Trump and Olaf Scholz, Berset has earned a reputation as ‘Switzerland’s



The future of Ukraine is the main priority, said Berset even before being elected as general secretary. Photo: Keystone

Rarely seen outside without his Borsalino – the Alain Berset that Switzerland remembers well. The hat became Berset’s trademark particularly during the Covid pandemic. Photo: Keystone

statesman’. This helped him in the race to become the next secretary general. His rivals for the post, Indrek Saar (Estonia) and Didier Reynders (Belgium), lacked such experience.

Berset also knows about crises, having been the face of the government’s Covid response from the outset as health minister. He, and the rest of the Federal Council, were widely praised for Covid restrictions that were relatively measured compared to those of other countries. But he also came in for fierce criticism from those who were against rules like social distancing and the wearing of face coverings.

Berset made headlines in government when an alleged former lover reportedly tried to blackmail him. And in summer 2022, he was intercepted by two military aircraft after flying his rented Cessna 182 into restricted French airspace. The media had a field day, but the SP politician batted off awkward questions with aplomb. His nonchalance, as critics called it, may have rubbed some people the wrong way, yet Berset’s approval ratings were largely unaffected. During his last year in office, he was still viewed by the public as the most influential member of the Federal Council.

It appears that the Council of Europe was also looking for someone like Berset. You should never forget where you come from, Berset told the “Tages-Anzeiger”, noting pointedly that he was a federal councillor from Fribourg who was joining the Council of Europe as a Swiss national. Incidentally, Berset rejects criticism of the ECtHR for its verdict on the ‘climate seniors’ case (see “Swiss Review” 4/2024). Switzerland ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and is obliged to implement rulings by the Strasbourg judges, he said. “We lie in the heart of Europe and share Europe’s values.”