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Swiss flair

When it comes to money and diplomacy, Switzerland is an influential global player. But do other aspects of the national brand suit a broader international role? We asked seven of its best about what the future holds.

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Swiss special



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Simonetta Sommaruga

President, Swiss Confederation

When Simonetta Sommaruga began her term as president of the Swiss Confederation in January 2020, there was no way she could have predicted the challenges that lay ahead. While making political decisions during the pandemic was hard for leaders around the world, Switzerland's unique system threw up some extra hurdles. Every year the presidency rotates between the seven members of the Federal Council; yet no matter who is president, all government decisions must be made collectively by the members. Sommaruga sat down with MONOCLE at the Federal Palace in Bern to reflect on a tumultuous time and the advantages of the Swiss system. — TB

How would you define the Swiss path during the pandemic?

It is very much linked to our political system and our government with the seven members from four different political parties. This means that when we make big decisions in government, we have a lot of discussions. And that helped us to not go in the direction where we closed everything but also not in the direction where you just leave people by themselves. We call it a *Mittelweg*.

You and your colleagues stood up in front of the cameras every day and there was a precision to it. Did you ever have a dress rehearsal about what you were going to present to the nation?

The seven members within the government have completely different points of view. Because of this we had to debate. I call that a collective intelligence. That also helped afterwards in the communication. We had an approach, we had to clarify things and, when we went out, we could really say what we had decided and why we had decided it.

“It’s extremely important to be in direct contact, to discuss, to see, to learn from each other”



How much do you compare what you do with what’s happening beyond Switzerland’s borders?

It’s extremely important to be in direct contact, to discuss, to see, to learn from each other. But at the same time, every country has to find its own way. When we took measures, it was important that people could understand why a certain measure was taken. That goes on to be a real challenge because our country does not do this kind of thing by pressure, by fines. In this situation it’s extremely important for people to be sure about schools, the post office and public transport. At the same time our cohesion helps us in the crisis because there is something like a [common] ground we can count on.

You mentioned the word cohesion. Have there been lessons in federalism – both good and bad – in this?

Federalism is really a strength of Switzerland. If you have an idea in one canton, you can do it. You don’t have to wait until everybody asks for that. In the beginning of the pandemic it was, of course, the Federal Council that had to make the decisions. And now we are in this situation, we have to learn where federalism is still very positive because it helps us to make the decisions very specifically and very fast.

How hard has it been for you to maintain diplomatic relationships during this time?

In Switzerland, one of the tasks of the president is also to represent our country abroad but it was almost impossible to go abroad. So I engaged in telephone diplomacy.

Do you prefer to take an old-fashioned phone call rather than a video call?

I am a musician – I like to hear the voice. But I also had a video conference with German chancellor Angela Merkel. We know each other. So we were both at the table and suddenly

we almost forgot that it was by video. But usually a phone call gives an intimate atmosphere, one where you are very much concentrating on what you’re saying.

Many people say that proper diplomacy needs to be done face to face. Do you worry about having to continue to do things from a distance?

People have to see each other to really have good discussions. We saw that in our country during the crisis in March; people used newspapers, television and the state broadcaster a lot. You could see that people were so glad to have credible news where they can be sure that there is no manipulation. There are countries that have tried to manipulate the news. This was an extremely important moment, in which people have become aware of what’s going on and of how critical it is when free expression is endangered.

I think that this is a problem we’re seeing at a time of political correctness. When people come from all over the world into European nations, is freedom of expression at least presented as a fundamental?

I would take that in a little bit of a broader scope. I would speak about the integration of people coming to our country. For eight years, I was minister of migration. In these eight years what we did the most was really to invest in integration. And integration is not adaptation but an understanding of how our country works and also giving people the possibility to integrate. I never wanted to have a country that invites everybody to come but then everyone just looks out for themselves. Then you have all these *banlieues* and parallel societies. But [instead] to say, “OK, we give those who come here the chance to integrate but they also have to do something.” This is something Switzerland is really strong at.



“We do not want to leave anybody behind. We want public services that are there for everybody”

I feel that in the Swiss context people are woven into society and they are not left behind. What do you think has made this work, at a cantonal level but also prescribed from a federal level?

I think one thing is that we do not want to leave anybody behind. It’s not only concerning immigration. We have good schools, we have public pools. We want these public services that are there for everybody. We also have our direct democracy, where people can have a referendum and can vote four times a year. Direct democracy is also a part of society that people can really participate in.

Would you like Switzerland to play a bigger role in the world, maybe on the Security Council or other channels?

Switzerland is a candidate for the UN Security Council for 2023-2024. If you look at it from an internal point of view, it’s a huge step. It means that our country wants to take more responsibility. The way of Switzerland, the way of dialogue, the way of inclusion, the way of searching for solutions, being pragmatic – we can bring that to the Security Council. And we will do it. Well, we have to be elected first.

Sommaruga’s presidential term ends on 31 December 2020. She’ll continue in her role as head of the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications.

How Switzerland works

Switzerland’s unique approach to governance and democracy sets it apart. The government, known as the Federal Council, is the nation’s executive power. Composed of seven federal councillors, representing a variety of political parties, the Council is elected by the United Federal Assembly every four years. These seven councillors collectively share the duties of head of state. The councillors rotate and every year one takes on the role of president, becoming “*primus inter pares*”, or first among equals.

Then there’s the country’s adherence to direct democracy, which means that all its citizens directly take part in decision-making via popular votes, which can be held up to four times a year. (Though, notably, women were not given the vote until 1971.) Only seven citizens are needed to launch a popular initiative on an issue but before a vote is held those seven citizens must collect 100,000 signatures in support of the proposal. The Federal Council, along with parliament, will then recommend which of the proposals should be put to a vote. — MJG