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A mountaineer as Mr Europe

His task is to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for Switzerland in Brussels – State Secretary Jacques de Watteville was appointed chief negotiator in the talks with the EU in August.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

Dark clothing was prevalent at the Credit Suisse Forum St. Peter in Zurich – epitomising the subtle charm of the banking fraternity. In the middle of the banking quarter, the Zurich banking association held its general meeting on a late afternoon in September. The main speaker was Jacques de Watteville, State Secretary for International Financial Matters since 2013. He presented an overview of Swiss financial diplomacy, outlining what has been achieved altogether thus far and where work still has to be done. The questions raised by the bankers ranged from critical to extremely critical: the Fatca agreement, the automatic exchange of information and stolen banking data were all touched upon. De Watteville was in his element. Relaxed but fully focused, he provided information with extreme precision, always with a smile on his face and sometimes even with a touch of humour. Here was someone who cannot easily be led up the garden path and who enjoys elegantly playing the ball back into the court of the questioner at just the right moment. He is also someone not just familiar with the broad outlines but who knows the details of his portfolio inside out.

Dependable chief negotiator

He will require these abilities even more so in future, as well as his sharp analytical mind, his tenacity as a negotiator and his stamina. The 64-year-old Jacques de Watteville is a keen alpinist (ski touring, mountaineering). He has now also reached the peak of his career professionally.



Jacques de Watteville (left) shortly after being appointed chief negotiator with Federal Councillor Didier Burkhalter on the Bundesplatz

The Federal Council appointed the tall, slim senior diplomat with an engaging personal manner as the chief negotiator in the talks with the EU in August. He remains head of the State Secretariat for International Financial Matters (SIF), but now has the task of coordinating the negotiations in the seven different portfolios open with the EU. But it is not simply a question of coordination: “I support the other lead negotiators and, in close contact with them, drive forward the overall negotiations with Brussels as well as their priorities and timeframe,” explains de Watteville.

The Federal Council is aiming for an overall result. However, the bilateral agreements III will only come within grasp if the issues concerning the agreement on the free movement of persons are resolved to the satisfaction of all parties (see the article on the “out of the cul-de-sac” initiative in this issue). Is there any chance at all of a successful outcome to negotiations on this extremely contentious issue? Jacques de Watteville tells “Swiss Review” that he is confident: “Ultimately there has to be a solution because neither the EU nor Switzer-

land can afford to fail. The damage would be too great for both sides.”

Outstanding reputation

There is a great amount of goodwill for de Watteville – including on the EU side. Martin Schulz, President of the European Parliament, told SRF radio in September: “The newly appointed chief negotiator seems like someone with enough experience to build the bridges that we have to cross.” That may be diplomatic etiquette but according to the NZZ Jacques de Watteville enjoys “an outstanding reputation in administrative, diplomatic and business circles”. Originally from Lausanne, he studied law and economics and obtained his doctorate in law. His wife is Syrian, he is the father of three children and he has an exemplary diplomatic career behind him: After his studies and undertaking a mission on behalf of the ICRC in Lebanon, he joined the diplomatic service in 1982. He was diplomatic advisor to foreign minister Pierre Aubert and then held posts as secretary, councillor of the embassy and ambassador in London, Damascus, Brussels and Beijing amongst other destinations. He was head of the FDFA's Economic and Financial Affairs Section from 1997 to 2003. In this role he undertook negotiations with the EU, the OECD and the USA and had a major impact on the development of Switzerland's international financial and taxation policy. He was ambassador and head of the Swiss mission to the EU in Brussels from 2007 to 2012. Since holding this post he has been seen as a well-connected expert in the complex mechanics of Brussels.

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