

ENABLING CHANGE, THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

THE SECOND MEM SUMMER SUMMIT UNDERSCORED THE IMPORTANT ROLE THE INITIATIVE OF USI CONTINUES TO HAVE IN BRIDGING CONTINENTAL EUROPE WITH THE MEDITERRANEAN AND THE MIDDLE EAST, BY ENABLING INTERACTIONS BETWEEN YOUNG CHANGE-MAKERS AND POLITICAL, BUSINESS AND INTELLECTUAL LEADERS FROM THE DIFFERENT AREAS OF THE MEDITERRANEAN. WE CONTINUE THE DIALOGUE THAT TOOK PLACE IN LUGANO WITH TWO INSTITUTIONAL FIGURES WHO SHARE THEIR VIEWS ON THE ESSENTIAL ROLE PLAYED BY WOMEN TO FOSTER CHANGE.
BY **DIMITRI LORINGETT**



At the second Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) Summer Summit organized by USI Università della Svizzera italiana, 100 young change-makers from 25 countries of the Middle East Mediterranean (MEM) region and Europe gathered in Lugano from 15 to 25 August 2019 with the goal to encourage alternative narratives of the MEM, by creating a privileged context for an open dialogue between young change-makers and political authorities, leaders, entrepreneurs and intellectuals. To continue this open dialogue, we spoke with two leading female figures who describe their role as women in the respective institutional and business contexts and who bring with them a clear message to the young leaders of tomorrow, engaged like them, in enabling change.

Maya Tissafi, currently Head of Mission in Abu Dhabi for the Swiss Confederation, from September 1 will head the Middle East and North Africa (MENAD) Division of the Directorate of Political Affairs (FDFA Federal Department of Foreign Affairs) in Bern, a position for which the Federal Council has conferred upon her the title of ambassador.

What are the current and future challenges of being a European diplomat – and a woman – in the Gulf Region?

«Though the United Arab Emirates (UAE) appear to have a strong western influence, their reality is more complex: on the one hand, it is an Ar-

ab country that is proud of its cultural heritage, where religion is of great importance in society and in which certain customs apply. On the other hand, the UAE also unites a multitude of cultures from Europe, Africa and Asia. With 90% of foreigners and different religions, tolerance and mutual respect are a great prerequisite for living peacefully side by side in the UAE. The cultural, social and religious diversity, which may surprise at first, does not delight all neighbouring countries equally and the UAE faces the great challenge of balancing tradition and modernity, conservatism and openness.

The same applies to the image of women. I have always seen it as an advantage to represent Switzerland as a woman in the UAE. The female Ambassadors regularly have access to events that my male colleagues were unable to attend: for instance, the events of the Women's Union or the events of Sheikha Fatima bin Mubarak Al Ketbi, the wife of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan who died in 2004, who often invites the country's most important women. Since the UAE explicitly wants to strengthen the public role of women, the female ambassadors are regularly asked for their participation in discussion forums and interviews».

During your assignment in Abu Dhabi, what developments or evolutions have you observed? In particular, how do you perceive the role of women in the UAE as well as in the neighbouring countries?

«The UAE has been for decades a pioneer in the region with concerns to the role of women. Among Emirati citizens, for example, women account for 70% of all university graduates, and by law every company must have at least one woman on its board of directors. There are 30% women ministers and the speaker of parliament is a woman.

Women in the UAE hold important positions, an example of which is Reem Al Hashimy, who in addition to her ministerial position is responsible for Expo 2020 in Dubai. A woman was explicitly recruited for the office of Youth Minister, the UAE is represented in the UN by a female ambassador, the management of the major art fairs "Abu Dhabi Art" and the "Sharjah Biennale" or the Falcon Clinic have been in women's hands for years».

What are the objectives of the MENAD Division you will be heading in Berne, and what are your own priorities?

«The Division is responsible for Switzerland's bilateral relations with the countries of the MENA region and for defending Switzerland's interests, coordinating therefore the foreign policy activities of the Federal authorities in areas such as politics, the economy, environment, education and security. In doing so, we are guided by the foreign policy strategy of the Federal Council and now also by the foreign policy vision AVIS 28, which closely links foreign and domestic policy. We are also working on initiatives that will benefit Switzerland and the countries in the MENA region. These include, for example, the MEM initiative in Lugano, which brings together young change-makers from the region and focuses on the exchange of ideas on regional challenges. We will also take part in Expo 2020 in Dubai with a Swiss pavilion and promote our excellent education system, the innovative private sector and Switzerland as a tourist destination. For me personally, it will also be important to work with the departments and other countries on initiatives in the field of regional stability and security, vocational training and job creation. I would also like to focus on communication: the Swiss people should understand exactly what we are doing and why. I am therefore looking forward to dis-

cussions in universities, vocational training institutions, in politics and with young people in open forums».

Monica Duca Widmer, President of the USI University Council since 2016, is a chemical engineer, founder, and head of EcoRisana SA, with a 16-year tenure (2005-2011) as Member of Parliament of the Canton Ticino. Mrs. Duca Widmer – who has been Board member in a number of higher education institutions, among which ETH, SATW and University of Lucerne, and Federal commissions, such as the Energy Research Commission and the Nuclear Safety Inspectorate – is currently President of Migros Ticino, and Appointed President of the future holding company of RUAG.

Your academic and professional curriculum presents a wide range of past and present activities in many fields, including politics, higher education, technology, and entrepreneurship. Would you consider yourself a role model for young women reluctant to approach the subjects of science and technology?

«Rather than being a role model, I would hope to prove that prejudices are what lead us to think that science and technology cannot appeal also to women. According to Eurostat, in 2017, 41% of scientists and engineers in the EU were women. Among the countries with the lowest number of women employed in these sectors we find, regrettably, Switzerland, with a percentage of 33%, confirming that legal equality has not yet led to a de facto equality. In addition, the number of girls interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) disciplines is still significantly low. USI is also no exception: although in the 2018/19 academic year there were 1,465 male and 1,350 female students, in the Faculty of Informatics there were only 52 women and 308 men».

At the MEM Summer Summit, we welcomed a hundred young leaders of tomorrow, which we call “change-makers”, precisely because of their commitment to fostering change in many areas, including the gender prejudices you have mentioned. In your view, as an entrepreneur, what could be done to improve the advancement of female careers?

«Despite the fact that in Switzerland we find ourselves in a relatively privileged situation and that there is clearly room for increasing the interest of young women in STEM subjects, I insist on the importance of fighting against gender prejudices to promote female careers. But then there is the issue of entrepreneurship, where Switzerland needs to catch up with other Western countries. In the recent report Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2018/19, issued by HEG Fribourg, we see that the Swiss, compared to other countries, are less inclined to engage in entrepreneurship. Only 7% - against 10% in the other countries considered – start a new business, despite the fact that there are many initiatives aimed at encouraging entrepreneurship. I see this as a wake-up call, because without entrepreneurs we would not have enterprises. Despite the high level of education of the population in Switzerland and the good rate of success, there is lack of willingness to get involved. Leonardo Da Vinci said, “He who possesses most must be most afraid of loss”. Why should one take up the challenge of creating his/her own company, when being just an employee can better protect from the risks of failing? We need to change this attitude and therefore I welcome those initiatives like, for example, the CP Start-Up of USI (the university incubator for start-up projects), where assistance is provided to young entrepreneurs who want to turn an innovative idea or a project into an entrepreneurial activity. In this



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respect, I see great potential for all young entrepreneurs, women and men alike, to make change happen».

You were recently appointed President of the future holding company of RUAG, the Swiss technology company active in the fields of aerospace and defence. How do you see yourself in this new role, and what are your priorities?

«Clearly, this is a great challenge: the task is to separate the Holding RUAG between the army sector and the other international units. The Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) tasks that RUAG carries out for the Swiss Army will remain under Federal ownership, while the military technology sectors providing services to the market and that are not relevant for national security, will be privatised. My priority - and my role - is to ensure that everything is done in accordance

with the regulations of the Federal Council, which has decided on this separation also to increase security and to prevent products from the our armaments industry from ending up in countries with ongoing conflicts».



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