Following several exits at UBS, Christine Novakovic is emerging as the strongwoman of the Swiss bank’s wealth arm. The ambitious European boss faces resistance as she plots her next career move.

She’s called «Christl» in banking circles: Christine Novakovic’s diminutive nickname harkens from her south Tyrolean heritage. At 54, after eight years as a managing director at UBS and one as wealth head on the Swiss bank’s key European, Middle East, and Africa market, Novakovic is poised to take her next career step.

Her reputation as an ambitious and demanding banker is underscored by the recent exits of two high-ranking bankers in Germany, including country head Thomas Rodermann, within weeks of each other. Novakovic put the kibosh on Rodermann's play for wider influence in Europe after he spent three years building up UBS' continental bank, Europe SE, according to two sources familiar with the situation.

A spokeswoman for UBS said the role of Rodermann had overlapped with Novakovic's responsibilities. Novakovic quickly took over the European arm herself, and elevated Marcus Stollenwerk for the German wealth business.

Unshy in Turf Wars

The episodes illustrate that Novakovic has cemented her power in UBS' wealth division, where she oversees $500 billion in assets. The first woman to bag «executive of the year» in Germany – in 2003 – Novakovic sat out the financial crisis as a gallery owner. She returned to banking in 2011 as head of UBS' corporate client arm in Switzerland, then took over the Swiss investment bank three years later.

She was furious at being passed over for the top Swiss job two years ago, when ex-Commerzbank boss Martin Blessing took over from Swiss banker Lukas Gaehwiler. Unusually openly confident, Novakovic vented her irritation internally – including to CEO Sergio Ermotti. Nevertheless, she settled in – today, she and Blessing, who is now her boss at the wealth arm, enjoy a good relationship.

Thirsty for More

Novakovic was unamused to be passed over for the same job one year later, and threw herself into the running to replace long-standing private bank head Juerg Zeltner, who left late in 2017. She lost out to Blessing (again), but her irritation was short-lived when the German banker gave
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her the top EMEA job.

She controls the second-largest region in the wider division, after the U.S., where $1.2 trillion in funds sit. Her credentials are solid: she ran Citigroup's corporate, retail, and private business in Germany and sat on German HVB's top management. Sixteen months into her latest job, she is said to be thirsty for a bigger role at UBS' private bank, which at $2.26 trillion in assets is the world's largest.

Elbowing Through Conflicts

The higher the rank, the thinner the air – and Novakovic has never been shy of fighting her corner. She and UBS operating chief Sabine Keller-Busse (pictured below) had their differences, according to another senior UBS banker.

The two women are a study in contrasts: the Swiss Keller-Busse is a cerebral former consultant who can be brittle in interactions, according to a person who has worked with her. Novakovic, who began her career as a trader, isn't shy of deploying her considerable charm and lightness
in a professional setting.

UBS C-Suite Search

Partly because she is unusually brash for a woman in Switzerland’s still male-dominated banking industry, «Christl» can rile, several people who have worked with her said. To her credit, she and Keller-Busse seem to have worked through their differences. Novakovic also hunkered after what she will have perceived as career setbacks, leading UBS’ investment bank to excellent league table rankings, for example.

Her current job opens the door for more, especially against the backdrop of CEO Ermotti’s efforts to deepen the talent bench. Asset management head Ulrich Koerner is also reported to be on his way out, as finews.com reported in January, which would further deplete top talent.

Wealth Clash

Now in his seventh year at the helm of UBS, Ermotti – who turns 59 next month – will also sooner or later leave the bank. For Novakovic, success in the key German market would be an excellent springboard to move higher up.

To be sure, she faces obstacles along the way, including run-ins with Josef «Joe» Stadler (pictured below), an influential private banker who runs UBS’ ultra-rich business. Stadler, who gained massively in influence in the 2018 merger of UBS’ private bank, and Novakovic have clashed over turf, according to a person familiar with the matter – just as Stadler clashed with her predecessor, Paul Raphael.
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The conflict is an inevitable result of UBS' confusing matrix organization and centers around influence over lucrative ultra-rich clients. Novakovic isn't likely to risk an open conflict with Stadler, who is said to hold sway with CEO Ermotti and defeated Raphael, an industry heavyweight, as finews.com reported.

By contrast, Novakovic maintains stronger ties to Blessing rather than Ermotti. In the rarified air of UBS' C-suite, she just has to keep her cool long to signal that she is keeping all her options open.

Reporting by Katharina Bart and Peter Hody