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Cover:

Federal Councillor Adolf Ogi learning about the duties of the Swiss yellow berets in the Bosnian town of Tuzla.
(Photo: Keystone)

IMPRESSIONS

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« OSCE – a daunting acronym. We must try to clarify the purpose of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe because on the face of things it does not seem very attractive. But the truth is that one of the great diplomatic adventures of the old continent lies behind it. It is made up of 55 states which have come together to prevent and where necessary calm conflicts by means of dialogue and 'good offices'. The principle of consensus – the idea that no decision can be taken against the wish of even one participating state – is at the basis of every decision made. The OSCE presidency is determined on the basis of rotation, and 1996 is Switzerland's year. This could not come at a better time, since something was badly needed to draw Swiss diplomacy out of its mothballs.

We have to admit it. First came Switzerland's refusal to join the United Nations, then its rejection of the European Economic Area. Then there was the No vote to creating a unit of blue helmets. All these left their mark on the international scene: long faces, defiance, coldness. In short, Switzerland's image abroad has worsened. Now an attempt is being made to soften the edges. Berne has decided to act by making itself more available to the countries of Eastern Europe – which are still strongly marked by the old division between two political blocs but are nevertheless on the road to democracy.

By a historical coincidence Switzerland – as this year's president of the OSCE – finds itself compelled to deal with two deep wounds, one old, one new: Bosnia, which provided the spark that set off the First World War in 1914, and Chechnya, a crisis

area which contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union. The presence of the OSCE in these two conflicts is little more than symbolic, it is true, but is it useless? Absolutely not. Switzerland's neutrality and political tradition – which are based on peaceful coexistence and the idea that different ethnic groups, languages and religions are a source of reciprocal enrichment – represents a strength and a hope for all those countries which have to repair the dreadful damage caused by fratricidal conflict.

It was not by chance that it was Swiss specialists of political institutions who were called upon to give advice in such countries as Russia, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. This contribution and the role of Swiss mediators in such countries as Chechnya, Georgia and Ukraine has lifted any possible doubt about the determination of Switzerland to contribute to European stability at the pace and with the diplomatic instruments with which it is familiar.

Neither the OSCE nor Switzerland during its year of presidency will be able to eliminate the waves of violence which are afflicting so many peoples. The struggle for human rights and democracy requires the contribution of all. The roles of an institution with very limited power such as the OSCE and of a tiny country like Switzerland may well represent an ingredient which is indispensable to the peace process in the world as we know it.



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