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A key role for Switzerland

Switzerland's presidency of the OSCE enables it once again to play a key role in the process of security and cooperation in Europe, as was the case between 1973 and 1989 in the framework of the neutral and non-aligned countries (N + N), which acted as both intermediaries and mediators between the two blocks. A coordination unit has been set up in Berne with a staff of 20, and Switzerland has strengthened its presence in the various OSCE missions.

a High Commissioner on National Minorities, a Secretariat, an Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, a Conflict Prevention Centre and a Forum for Security Cooperation. A troika-type presidency had already been set up in 1990. The OSCE's administrative resources are modest, however, and the new body employs only about 150 staff.

This year Switzerland, assisted by Hungary and Denmark, holds the presidency and is responsible in general terms for implementing the OSCE's tasks (conducting its operations in preventive diplomacy, taking initiatives in the event of crisis or violation of OSCE ob-



Switzerland took over the OSCE presidency at the Ministerial Council held in Budapest last December. (Photo: Keystone)

ligations and chairing its various organs). The OSCE's activities in 1996 are dominated by the task of establishing a framework to implement the Dayton Agreement for peace in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The OSCE is responsible for organising elections, human rights, confidence building measures and dis-

armament. But this does not mean that it will neglect its other missions (Macedonia, Georgia, the Baltic states, Moldova, Chechnya, Nagorno-Karabakh, etc.). A start is also being made in preparing a security model for the Europe of the next century. ■

Interview with Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti

“Taking an active role”

Swiss Review: Half of Switzerland's year as president of the OSCE is over. How was the presence of our country in the “hot spots” of international diplomacy received by other countries accustomed to seeing Switzerland stand aside?

Flavio Cotti: The new role which Switzerland is now playing has been accepted abroad with goodwill. We have put aside our former reserve in foreign policy, which included only the provision of good offices, and we are taking an active role – but within the framework of clearly defined institutional responsibilities towards the internatio-

nal community. These activities carried out by Switzerland have not gone without remark.

Has the multi-ethnic and multicultural political tradition of Switzerland strengthened the effectiveness of OSCE interventions in areas such as Chechnya and ex-Yugoslavia which are being completely torn apart by civil war?

The political culture developed by Switzerland in the course of its history is not based on domination by one part of the population, but on federalist autonomy and political balance. This arouses great interest. It is clear that Switzerland's

OSCE presidency is marked by a high degree of sensitivity to the problems and rights of minorities. This helps us to understand and approach all the unsolved problems connected with the coexistence of different ethnic groups.

Is our presidency of the OSCE not also contributing to overcoming mistrust about foreign policy among our own population – and in such a way that the characteristics and the pace of our federal traditions are respected?

With its candidature to preside over the OSCE the Federal Council gave a sign

of opening up which encountered no domestic opposition. Indeed many people have recognised the importance of this commitment and are supporting us. I myself am convinced that the OSCE presidency will also have favourable consequences in other areas, for example in our relationship with the United Nations.

There is a sense in which the foreign ministry you are running represents "a transmission belt" between different mentalities. Has your opinion about traditional Swiss values, such as neutrality and federalism, changed in any way?

Since the end of the Cold War the significance of neutrality has been fundamentally transformed. But its basic principle – which is the obligation not to participate in armed conflicts – is still valid. Today we must take another step forward and become aware that this principle does not exclude either an active foreign policy or participation in international peacekeeping troop units. On federalism it should be said that many countries are still sceptical, but that this is developing into an increasingly important element in conflict resolution – and prevention. Fed-

assess this, now that half of your period in office at the head of the OSCE has gone by?

In the first six months of our presidency the peace process in Bosnia-Herzegovina has been at the centre of our activities. And I may say that the OSCE has been playing a decisive role. At the end of the day it will be possible to confer upon Bosnia an autonomy which is democratically legitimate only by means of elections. These will strengthen both peace and the identity of Bosnia as a state. One of my other big concerns is to strengthen the institutions of the OSCE to enable it to respond to new challenges quickly and efficiently.

Following the summit meetings in Geneva, Florence and most recently Vienna and your various visits to Sarajevo, you have now given the green light for elections in Bosnia. Was this a difficult decision?

I would certainly say so. The minimum guarantees for maintaining the principles of freedom, correct behaviour and democracy mentioned in the peace agreement are the essential conditions for carrying out elections. The country presiding over the OSCE was called upon to decide whether these conditions



The improvised hairdressing salon in the courtyard of the OSCE mission in Grozny.



Heidi Tagliavini in front of the OSCE mission with her colleagues from Poland and Hungary, a Russian officer (centre) and a Chechen bodyguard. (Photos: zvg)

A personal view of the first stage of the OSCE's mission in Chechnya

"Like camping in the worst conditions"

The conflict between Moscow and Grozny had been smouldering for four years: Chechnya's self-proclaimed president, Zhokar Dudaev, had declared independence in 1991, but Moscow never accepted it. In December

*Heidi Tagliavini **

1994 open war broke out. Four months of extremely heavy fighting laid waste the city of Grozny and a number of nearby villages. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which has 55 participating states, tried to mediate from the outset. In April 1995 it was given a mandate to try and resolve the conflict peacefully, and an international delegation made up of five diplomats and a colonel was sent to Chechnya.

Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti attaches great importance to this peace

* Heidi Tagliavini studied French, Italian and Russian at Geneva University and since 1982 has been with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. From April to December, 1995, she was a member of the OSCE mission in Grozny.

mission and from the beginning ensured that Switzerland was represented in the OSCE Assistance Group. So in April 1995 I landed in Grozny as the only woman in the original OSCE mission. From April to December of that year I played a part in building it up and extending its role. The tasks given to us were many. Amongst them were the important concerns of promoting a peaceful resolution of the dispute through negotiations, attempting to ensure that human rights were observed, helping the numerous refugees to return to their homes, supporting international aid organisations, etc.

Many ups and downs

After six weeks of tough negotiations I was present at the signature of a military agreement, which was the first important result of our efforts. In my daily contact with the population while trying to mediate and to assess the human rights situation I learned much about the warmth and hospitality of this people of the Caucasus – and also much about their stormy temperament. Criss-cross-

ing the country on my peace mission I discovered at close hand that not all villages supported renegade rebel leader Dudaev. I also experienced the slow undermining of the military agreement through brutal murder attempts on central figures in the peace process, as well as the gradual circumvention of the OSCE, which now in mid-1996 is having a new go at mediation under the Swiss presidency.

When in April 1995 we arrived in a Russian military helicopter at Grozny airport, which had been the scene of heavy conflict and was virtually destroyed, we could see at once what sort of a place we had landed at. The impression made on me by the destroyed city and the total chaos around me was naturally extremely strong. But it is terrifying how quickly one gets used to the ruins of war, and after the first shock I immediately saw that life was continuing all around me. Heavily made-up and prettily dressed young girls were flirting on the streets, and there were lively markets which interested people more than anything else in spite of the circumstances –

perhaps indeed because only the illusion of normal life let them come to terms with the total destruction around them.

I was more disturbed by the many Russian tanks which raced through the streets far too fast with heavily armed soldiers on top of them. This state of siege created much tension between the civilian population and the army and meant that armed clashes were everyday events.

Chairs a luxury

Our Assistance Group was given a house which in spite of being near the centre and surrounded by widespread destruction had remained relatively intact. We lived around a courtyard typical of the northern Caucasus which was made up of two small buildings and a terrace which we used as a kitchen combined with a living and work room in summer and until far into the winter. Our rooms had windows but no doors. There was sometimes gas, and a tap in the courtyard gave us water sporadically. But there was no electricity, and in view of



Flavio Cotti with Bosnian Prime Minister Hasan Muratovic. (Photo: RDZ)

eralism makes it possible to bring together state sovereignty and autonomy in one basket. And I remain totally convinced of the importance of both these principles.

In spite of the scarcity of financial resources and its limited room for manoeuvre, the OSCE has been playing an important role, particularly during 1996. How do you

were satisfied or not. I have tried to weigh the arguments pro and con with the greatest possible objectivity. Naturally if you make a comparison with "normal" elections there is something missing. But it is important above all that there is now a reasonable opportunity to lay a basis for the reconstruction of the country.

Interview: Ilaria Bignasci