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A "Tinguely machine"?

Switzerland is president for 1996 of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). This is the biggest organisation in the world dealing in security. It groups 55 northern hemisphere states stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Its biggest responsibility this year is implementing the civilian part of the Dayton Agreement on Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The OSCE was not able to prevent war breaking out in ex-Yugoslavia, conflicts spreading to many parts of the ex-Soviet Union, the Russian military intervention in Chechnya, tension and incidents in the Aegean Sea and human rights violations in other places.

Pierre-André Tschanz

Nor has it succeeded in promoting the setting up of true democracies in a good number of countries in central and eastern Europe and northern Asia. It sometimes seems a bit like one of those famous "machines" made by the Swiss sculptor, Jean Tinguely: enormous, noisy, and impressive by their use of vast energy to no effect. But is the OSCE really so useless? Is its balance sheet so negative?

Preventive diplomacy

The very unfavourable picture of the OSCE in the eyes of some observers is due partly to difficulties in the way of chalking up successes in the OSCE's

main field of action, which is preventive diplomacy, whereas failures are much more quickly visible. In celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act last year in Geneva, CSCE veterans from that time asked themselves what role the east-west cooperation process may have played in the collapse of the Iron Curtain, the unification of Germany and the break-up of the Soviet Union. It is of course impossible to reply to this question precisely for lack of concrete evidence. But there is little doubt that the CSCE played a part in the transformation process in Europe and the end of the Cold War.

Born in the 1970s the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) was a forum for cooperation on security matters in which states attempted to resolve tension and conflict on the basis of reciprocal political obligations. At the end of nearly three years of negotiations, the 35 participating states (all of Europe except Albania, plus the United States and Canada) reached an agreement in 1975, which became known as the Helsinki Final Act. This contained a

set of principles (see box) and recommendations for improving security and promoting cooperation in Europe. The signatories also agreed to take joint steps to check compliance with these principles and implement the recommendations. Their work was to be based on consensus, a method which made it possible to progress by small steps without treading on each other's toes. It also enabled small states (the neutral and non-aligned, and in particular Switzerland) to play quite a large part. But it caused one major rumpus, when Malta nearly blocked agreement because it thought the CSCE was not paying sufficient attention to Mediterranean problems. Later the follow-up conferences of Belgrade (1977-78), Madrid (1980-83) and Vienna (1986-89), as well as many meetings between specialists in various fields, enabled the forum – not without a few hiccoughs – to give substance to its measures both in the fields of transparency and military security and in what is often referred to as the CSCE's "human dimension".

From Vancouver to Vladivostok

Then came 1989, the year of transformation in Europe. The CSCE's Paris summit in 1991 approved the Paris Charter for the new Europe which defined a community of common values over an area stretching from Vancouver to Vladivostok. The optimism of that time was expressed by the affirmation of ten principles, which were given the status of universal values. These included pluralist democracy based on free elections, the rule of law guaranteed by safeguarding human rights and the market economy. The Paris summit also began the process of making the CSCE into a genuine institution, and at the Budapest conference at the end of 1994 it changed its name to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe with the acronym of OSCE. The new body is headed by a Ministerial Council, which holds periodic summit meetings, a Senior Council, a Court of Conciliation and Arbitration sitting in Geneva,

The Helsinki Decalogue: The ten basic principles of conduct of the OSCE:

- Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty;
- Refraining from the threat or use of force;
- Inviolability of frontiers;
- Territorial integrity of states;
- Peaceful settlement of disputes;
- Non-intervention in internal affairs;
- Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion and belief;
- Equal rights and self-determination of peoples;
- Cooperation among states;
- Fulfilment in good faith of obligations under international law.

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