

10 November 2014

Renewed Relevance and Visibility – Switzerland’s Chairmanship of the OSCE

While acting as the OSCE’s 2014 Chairman, has Switzerland been effective in handling the Ukraine crisis? Yes, says Stephanie Liechtenstein, and for three reasons – the resources Bern has dedicated to the task; its ability to act as an honest and neutral broker; and its capacity to lead under difficult circumstances.

By Stephanie Liechtenstein for ISN

When Switzerland took over the chairmanship of the OSCE on 1st January, it expected to take the helm of a split organization that was widely regarded as blocked, increasingly irrelevant and as being in the process of scaling down – but things turned out very differently. A major crisis broke out in Ukraine that called into question all normative foundations of European security and international law, and necessitated a large and rapid operational response. The OSCE – together with Switzerland as its Chair – suddenly went from obscurity into the spotlight.

A Difficult Start

Under the tagline ‘creating a security community for the benefit of everyone’, Bern initially prepared a well-balanced set of priorities for its chairmanship. For the first time in the organization’s history, Switzerland also formed a consecutive chairmanship with Serbia and presented a joint work-plan with the joint goals of improving reconciliation and cooperation in the Western Balkans and making as much headway as possible with the so-called Helsinki+40 Process. The latter sets out to achieve as many concrete deliverables as possible by the end of 2015 (the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act) on issues such as the future role of the OSCE and the creation of a united and indivisible security community. However, mounting tensions in Ukraine forced Switzerland to reorganize and refocus its chairmanship and assume the role of an active crisis manager for the most dangerous East-West confrontation on European soil since the end of the Cold War.

In this respect, the early part of Switzerland’s stewardship of the OSCE undoubtedly adds credibility to [Walter Kemp’s argument](#) that OSCE chairmanships are ultimately defined by their ability to deal with stormy weather. One of Bern’s first challenges was the intensifying stand-off between Russia and Ukraine over the Crimean peninsula. Germany and the United States initially hoped that the OSCE could serve as an “off-ramp” for Russia out of the crisis and suggested that Russian troops could return to their barracks while the OSCE sought to ensure minority rights for ethnic Russians living in Crimea. Yet, Russia decided against this and officially annexed Crimea on 18 March, handing the entire international community with a fait accompli. However, that’s not to say that Bern sat idly by as the Crimean crisis unfurled. On 24th February, Ambassador Tim Guldemann was appointed Personal

Representative on Ukraine by the Swiss OSCE Chairperson-in-Office (CIO) and current Swiss President Didier Burkhalter. In this capacity, Guldemann at least succeeded in visiting Crimea at the beginning of March and made great efforts to facilitate dialogue and to help defuse tensions. However, Switzerland and the rest of the OSCE could only watch as Russia made inroads into Ukraine.

On top of the Crimea crisis, Switzerland was also confronted with criticism by the United States. Washington viewed a number of comments made by Switzerland's personal representative on Ukraine as being too friendly and accommodating towards Russia [1]. "One of the unique features of the OSCE is that it is grounded in a set of principles and is based on a comprehensive approach to security," says Ambassador Daniel Baer, Permanent Representative of the US to the OSCE. "As OSCE Chair you have to lead the Organization and that leadership should be defined by strictly holding on to those principles and holding those responsible who are violating them."

Crisis Management Begins

Criticism aside, Switzerland was nevertheless instrumental in initiating negotiations on a Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine. However, these efforts were initially complicated by Russia's refusal to attend talks in Vienna. Indeed, Moscow's attendance was only guaranteed after Didier Burkhalter helped to convince Vladimir Putin that such a mission could help to protect Russian speaking minorities in eastern Ukraine. That said, negotiations stalled several times over the following weeks and were only unblocked after being taken to the level of foreign ministers or heads of state. The main stumbling block related to the geographic scope of the mission's deployment. While the West and Ukraine wanted the deployment to include Crimea, the Russian Federation was vehemently opposed to this proposal.

Ultimately, the deadlock could only be overcome with the deliberate use of ambiguous language in the final text of the mandate. Ambassador Thomas Greminger, Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the OSCE and Chairperson of the OSCE Permanent Council, describes the successful outcome of the negotiation process as a team effort between the Swiss Chairmanship and the German government. Indeed, the role played by Germany in this and subsequent efforts was crucial, given that Berlin, "views the approach underlying the OSCE as consistent with the basic tenets of its foreign policy," claims Ambassador Rüdiger Lüdeking, Permanent Representative of Germany to the OSCE.

Winter into Summer

With consensus finally reached on the 21st March, the OSCE began to prepare for its first large-scale mission in over a decade. The first monitors were deployed to Ukraine within 24 hours of the mandate's approval by the Permanent Council in Vienna. According to Ambassador Christian Strohal, the Permanent Representative of Austria to the OSCE, Switzerland not only demonstrated leadership during the negotiations, it also helped the OSCE to gain considerable visibility and relevance. In addition, the fact that all 57 participating-states supported the decision provided the mission with a great deal of legitimacy and credibility. Over the next few months, the SMM was instrumental in providing impartial facts in an increasingly polarized conflict environment. SMM monitors were among the first on the scene of the Malaysia Airlines MH17 disaster, and used contacts on both sides of the conflict to facilitate expert investigations of the crash site.

Switzerland's next attempt to deescalate the Ukraine crisis came at the beginning of May with a proposed "roadmap for concrete steps forward". The roadmap was aimed at implementing the Geneva Joint Statement of 17th April signed by the US, EU, Ukraine and the Russian Federation.

Widely regarded at the time as a diplomatic breakthrough, the Joint Statement called for a cessation of violence, the disarming of illegally armed groups, and vacation of illegally occupied buildings. The OSCE SMM was tasked with supporting these measures and working towards the establishment of a broad national dialogue. To support this, Switzerland proposed the initiation of a series of Ukrainian-owned National Dialogue Roundtables. However, the situation on the ground in Ukraine was not conducive to continuing the dialogue process beyond the 25 May elections. Fighting continued and two OSCE SMM teams were abducted and taken as hostages by rebels.

At this point, calls for the formation of a contact group (as suggested by CiO Burkhalter as early as 24 February during his briefing to the UN Security Council) gathered momentum. On 8 June, Burkhalter appointed the experienced Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini to accompany the talks of the Trilateral Contact Group, consisting of representatives of Ukraine, the Russian Federation and the OSCE. The Trilateral Contact Group, under the auspices of the OSCE, had the advantage of being able to hold regular video conferences with rebels and also face-to-face meetings with them in Minsk without offending either Kiev or Moscow. The group was also instrumental in negotiating access to the MH17 crash site alongside helping to negotiate the release of the OSCE monitors and eventually bringing about a ceasefire on 5 September.

Business as usual in Basel?

Currently, the Swiss chairmanship is preparing to host the OSCE Ministerial Council (MC) meeting in Basel on 4-5 December. It's a meeting that will be dominated by the Ukraine crisis and its impact on the principles of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 2010 Astana Commemorative Declaration. "The OSCE MC in Basel cannot be business as usual," stresses Walter Kemp of the International Peace Institute. It will also go a long way to determining the overall success of Switzerland's Chairmanship of the OSCE. So what should be expected from the Basel MC meeting? "The Swiss OSCE Chairmanship wants to start a process that deals with core and basic questions of European security in the medium and long term," explains Ambassador Greminger." One idea involves setting up and officially launching a Panel of Eminent Persons that could propose recommendations on how European security can be strengthened in light of the new challenges posed by the Ukraine crisis. In addition, the Swiss Chair wants to reinvigorate the Helsinki+40 Process by feeding the lessons learned from the Ukraine crisis in to this process.

Switzerland will also table a number of draft decisions in each of the OSCE's three security dimensions. Possible topics for MC decisions could be the issue of foreign fighters and kidnapping for ransom, disaster risk reduction, prevention of torture, strengthening mediation efforts in the OSCE area, combating transnational threats and a youth action plan. Furthermore, the MC will have to take a decision on who will hold the OSCE chairmanship in 2016 and 2017, with Germany and Austria very strong candidates.

A Successful Chairmanship?

Few (if any) OSCE chairmanships have had to deal with the chain of events that have befallen Switzerland in 2014. If anything, the challenges posed by the Ukraine crisis can only be compared to those faced by the 1999 Norwegian OSCE chairmanship as a result of the Kosovo crisis. Yet, Switzerland has succeeded in assuming leadership of the OSCE and acting as a broker between participating states. Indeed, it became increasingly clear over the course of the Swiss chairmanship that the OSCE had stepped in and filled a void in the high-level management of the Ukraine conflict. Other international organizations such as the EU or the UN were increasingly ruled out as they were either seen as 'part of the problem' by some or as not having the appropriate mandate by others.

Consequently, a number of factors help to explain Bern's efficient handling of the Ukraine crisis. First,

Switzerland was able to provide sufficient financial resources for its Chairmanship and could draw on a pool of experienced diplomats to support its activities. In addition, Swiss neutrality provided Bern with opportunities to act as an 'honest broker' between East and West. This is of particular relevance as the OSCE takes decisions by consensus and the core task of the OSCE chairmanship is to help build this among the 57 participating states. Finally, Didier Burkhalter's role should not be downplayed. His status as OSCE Chairperson in Office (CiO), Swiss Foreign Minister and President of Switzerland has provided him gravitas and access to assume leadership under difficult circumstances.

In this context, Switzerland has significantly enhanced the international profile and relevance of the OSCE by focusing on the organization's operational effectiveness and its role as a forum for high-level political dialogue. As Ambassador Strohal rightly says, "the OSCE and its core commitments are more relevant than ever. If the OSCE did not exist today, one would have to invent it." The question is whether that would still be possible today.

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[1] The Russian delegation to the OSCE was not available for interview.

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Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network \(ISN\)](#)

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