

# **A personal view of the first stage of the OSCE's mission in Chechnya : "Like camping in the worst conditions"**

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **23 (1996)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **13.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907755>

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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-

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

In the first six months of my 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

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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**

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 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

the scale of the destruction this was hardly surprising. So during the first few months we spent our evenings in our open-air kitchen by the light of candles and petrol lamps and our nights on camp beds and in army sleeping bags.

At first there was no furniture, crockery or cutlery and nothing to cook with. So we got the bare essentials from whatever was available in the bazaar. When a month later the first lorry-load of IKEA furniture (chairs, etc.) arrived it seemed a terrific luxury. Cooking and washing were a bore – in view of the water shortage taking a shower was almost an acrobatic exercise involving a plastic jug and basin. The only thing you could compare it all with was camping in the most difficult conditions imaginable. But a remarkable contrast to it all was our satellite telephone and super-modern computer, which were on for a few hours every day using a noisy generator.

Very difficult practical problems were keeping food without a fridge in temperatures rising to 40 degrees and finding petrol without water in it for our western vehicles used to clean fuel – and keeping our hair trimmed.

## “Little general”

Once a month a hairdresser called Raja came to us at the mission and cut our hair in the garden under the apricot tree using a piece of broken mirror and the only pair of scissors she had luckily rescued from her burnt-out hairdressing salon. We called her “generalchik” – or little general – as she wasn’t exactly gentle with us.

Unpleasant experiences? The worst of these were certainly the nightly gun-fights. After dusk Grozny was a free area for Chechen sharpshooters, and the return of fire by the Russian troops was always massive and from all directions. The five men in our group sat in the dark around the table in our open-air kitchen talking shop and trying to work out how far away from us the latest shoot-out might be. Of course no one wanted to admit that they were in the very least afraid.

Our OSCE group quite often came under direct threat as well. It seemed that not everybody agreed with our attempts to mediate. Our mission would suddenly be surrounded by more than a hundred heavily-armed militiamen who kept us under house arrest, or the build-

ing would be shot at by gunmen we never saw. Our daily drives through the occupied areas were often dangerous too, since anything could happen where fighting was going on. In autumn 1995 the ceasefire which had been agreed broke down, and this was followed by targeted murder attacks on key figures in the peace process – so that the general atmosphere of uncertainty got even worse.

## Peace needs time

In December 1995 my time in Chechnya was finally up. As I left, chances for peace looked bad. Had everything we had done been of no use at all? The problem is that peace can come only if all sides in the conflict want it to, and it is an illusion to think you can get rid overnight of a conflict which has been brewing for centuries. But one thing is sure: there can never be a military solution for Chechnya. Only negotiations can bring peace, and that is still the aim of the OSCE mission – now under Switzerland’s presidency. ■



The Ministerial Council Meeting of the OSCE held in Budapest last December. (Photo: Keystone)