

Symposium St. Gallen – Address of the Secretary-General Dr. R. Balzaretto

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The organizers have well done in choosing the theme of this year's St. Gallen Symposium, "Revival of Political and Economic Boundaries" which I can fully endorse. Nonetheless, I would like to give it a little twist by focusing on symbolic boundaries. Recently, there has been much talk at home of an "image crisis for Switzerland" abroad, followed by urgent calls for a crisis communication. Switzerland should set new communication boundaries and repair its image. It remains to be seen whether the crisis *really* increased, or there is simply increased talking and writing about "crisis". Of interest here is the notorious demand for "action" and "communication" that goes along with it. But is communication even possible in a crisis? And does it make sense? Or is it perhaps already too late? Allow me to share with you in the next few minutes some thoughts on the opportunities and the risks of communication in crises. For this, I would like to use a climatological metaphor: "Image building in crisis situations. Communication abroad between climate change and daily weather alterations".

The climate metaphor is very much to the point, for the climate and weather, too, are said to be in a crisis. The metaphor is also suitable because it draws our attention to an important distinction which allows for a better understanding of a sustainable communication abroad. The word climate means the local distribution of atmospheric conditions over a long period of time. For example, the climate of Switzerland: Switzerland enjoys a balanced, mild and moist climate much influenced by the Alps and the near seas. Thus, Southern Switzerland (Ticino) has the good fortune of benefiting from the flow of warm air from the Mediterranean – only if not buried under metres of snow! Climate change refers to the long term change in climate values. For example the significant increase of hot days in Switzerland over the past 100 years. Climate policy aims at stabilising the climate and preventing negative changes. Obviously, the daily weather has a lot to do with the climate, but it is has to be clearly separated from it. The weather

is the present short-term condition of the atmosphere. It is erratic, changeable, unpredictable and difficult to influence. Mountainous regions in particular are subject to sudden weather alterations – a fate they share with the (Channel) islands. When a weather disaster occurs, rapid and unbureaucratic emergency aid is needed. As important climate as policies may be in the long run, they make little sense in the weather catastrophe.

The distinction between climate and weather has its parallel in communication abroad. The image of a nation can be compared to a particular climate. It is a stable, long term indicator of a country's perception at home and abroad. As we know, the image of Switzerland abroad is on the whole positive: a high quality of life, political stability, credibility as a partner in international organizations, etc. Communication abroad aims at fostering the positive image of a country, in a way similar to climate policy. Actions aim to promote knowledge about Switzerland abroad (about the Swiss political system for example), improving the visibility of Switzerland, explaining the Swiss view point, creating sympathy, developing networks, etc. As in the case of scientific climate reports, this requires the detailed and continuous monitoring of Switzerland's image abroad, including the monitoring of mass media coverage on Swiss topics. On this basis, a strategic and sustainable communication abroad is possible.

When we now speak of the present crises, it is less a question of a "climatic" loss of image than of a short-term weather disaster. The problem about these crises is that they come unannounced and catch us off our guard. They depend on many factors that are difficult to control. A good example is the so-called "crisis" of the Swiss financial sector. Obviously, a crisis can't be inhibited by means of communication, and certainly not with image-related actions. In times of crisis, image promotion tends to be counterproductive, having the effect of a boomerang. The only thing to do is to cut one's losses by means of a quick and pragmatic crisis communication. Evidently, such crisis communication has to be more of a "cold" communication "about" the crisis, rather than of a "hot" communication "in" the crisis – as was repeatedly the case in the tax dispute with Germany. With a view to the current challenges facing the Swiss

financial system, communication abroad consequently emphasises negotiations and public affairs actions rather than media campaigns or public relations.

So, what can we learn from this metaphor? First of all, there's a need to differentiate between image promotion on one hand and crisis communication on the other. Image promotion cannot solve any crisis, nor indeed should it be expected to do so: for in a (weather) crisis, the mountain becomes a threat, and image promotion turns into a boomerang. At times of crisis, rapid and pragmatic communication and political action is needed in order to cut damages. Unlike, "climatic" image promotion focuses on the long run and tends to be preventive. It aims at the stabilisation of a positive image, building up trust and confidence, which, in turn, can be lived on in times of crises. Within the present crisis, public affairs activities can rely on the long term networks built up by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and its missions abroad, with the support of Presence Switzerland. After all, *these two* forms of communication abroad must be distinguished from one another, for they apply at different levels. *Both* however are indispensable, they can't replace one another, since they are complementary. Whereas crisis communication serves for short-term limitation of damage, image promotion aims at reducing our liability to crises as well as the likelihood of their occurrence *in the long term*.

To conclude, the cultivation of networks and the promotion of a positive image are indispensable for effective communication in times of crisis. This is particularly true with regard to the current challenges facing Switzerland. A positive image and a well-established network provide the ground swell of confidence that is needed in times of crises. Such an image is based on symbolic boundaries (What is Swiss? What is not?). Since these boundaries are rely on mutual trust and respect, they are necessarily inclusive – *not* exclusive. In a globalised world, only inclusive boundaries contribute to the future of a country.

I thank you for your attention