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## American veto in Berne

**After six weeks' work, the Berne meeting on human contacts between East and West, organized as part of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), ended during the last week of May without agreement of the final document. It was not the opposition of the East European countries which resulted in the failure to accept the agreed draft statement, but in fact a last-minute American veto. This agreed statement was a joint proposal of neutral and non-aligned states; Switzerland, which had contributed largely to drafting it, could not hide its disappointment.**

In getting the Soviet Union to come to Berne to talk about «personal contacts» (already a success in itself), the countries of the West wished above all to reaffirm that *détente* without a «human face» is an imposture. They came to the Swiss capital first as accusers, to show evidence, supported by examples, that the Iron Curtain still exists, but they also came as pleaders for the lifting of restrictions on freedom of movement between East and West of persons in those cases where even the most narrow-minded of bureaucrats admit that there are limits to pettiness and absurdity.

### Slow progress...

Progress, if any, in this area is slow and hardly spectacular. In this respect, the «Helsinki process» (the aims stated at the 1975 CSCE in Finland) on security and co-operation in Europe which is binding on all European states (except Albania) as well as on the United States and Canada, did not bring about the great thaw which some had hoped for. Besides, experience has shown that it is very difficult, even impossible, to induce Moscow to enter into new commitments which go beyond the Helsinki process, now eleven years old. At the Madrid CSCE review conference (a 1983 follow-up to Helsinki) it took three years before the Russians could be persuaded, for example, that, henceforth, requests for reunions of

families divided by political frontiers be dealt with «within a period of six months, as a general rule» and not merely «in a positive and humane spirit».

It follows that before the start of the Berne conference no one had many illusions about the chances



Usefull contacts at the Berne CSCE meeting: Swiss Secretary of State Edouard Brunner talking to the American delegate Michael Novak (left) and his Soviet colleague Yuri Kachlev (right). (Photo: Trachsel)

of achieving tangible results. At best, some indulged the hope that this meeting might contribute towards solving some particularly dramatic cases of East Europeans who have been trying for months, years even, to travel to the West or to have members of their families join them in their new homes in the West.

### ...But progress in spite of everything

Very quickly – and to the astonishment of all – it was realized,

however, that the Soviets and most of the other communist states were apparently prepared not only to settle several of such cases on a friendly basis (Switzerland cleared 20 or so of them out of a total of 36, in Berne) but also to clarify the «humanitarian» clauses of the Helsinki process and of the Madrid accord, in order to render them more enforceable. True, the concessions granted by the East were by no means revolutionary. And on the last day of the Berne conference, a charter which would proclaim the freedom of everyone to leave their native countries when they wanted to, and to go where they wished, was still a distant goal. None the less, the USSR gave way on some important points:

- It undertook to publish the incredible tissue of administrative regulations which make it so difficult for Soviet citizens to travel.
- It promised henceforth to examine «immediately» visa requests of a «humanitarian urgency» nature.
- It agreed to acknowledge, in an international document, that it violated the postal and telephone secrecy guaranteed to its citizens.

### A long-winded process

In all, it was possible to see, if not progress, at least a wish not to burn bridges. It was not very much. But in the present climate of East-West relations, it was something. And instead of discouraging its allies and best friends, the Americans should have been able to understand this.

We know the rest: on the last day of the Berne conference the State Department forbade the US delegation to go along with the compromise text agreed unanimously a few hours previously by the representatives of the 35 governments which participated (including the American representative). It was this gesture which caused the disappointment

of most of America's allies and best friends, even in Switzerland. In adopting a hard line vis-à-vis the Russians, the Americans were no doubt right; but in the humanitarian sphere a policy of all or nothing does not always benefit those it claims to be helping. ●

*Michel Walter,  
Swiss Radio International*

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