

‘BEYOND THE CURTAIN’

How a trip from Bern to Bucharest changed Swiss diplomacy

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Romanian Foreign Minister Corneliu Mănescu (left) welcomes Willy Spühler at Bucharest Airport, 18 April 1969.

(SRF-SWI)

Fifty years ago, Swiss diplomacy embarked on a new path when cabinet minister Willy Spühler travelled to Romania. It was the first time a Swiss foreign minister had visited a country in Eastern Europe.

“While [Romanian] Prime Minister Maurer, jovial and full of vigour, showed little restraint in his comments, President Ceaușescu presented himself as the party puritan, who considered and weighed up every single word. It was clear he didn’t want to leave anyone in any doubt about his political convictions and his loyalty to communism. On the other

hand, he hammered out just as clearly and unequivocally the Romanian position on independence and national sovereignty as well as states not interfering in other states' affairs."

Dodis

This article is part of a series devoted to the "Swiss Diplomacy Stories", in collaboration with the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland ([Dodis](#)).

The Dodis research centre, an institute of the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Science in Bern, focuses on the history of Swiss foreign policy and international relations since the creation of the federal state in 1848.

(Dodis)

That was taken from [a report](#) dated April 30, 1969, by Hans Miesch, head of the Eastern service of the Swiss federal political department.

In the mid-1960s, a fresh wind blew through relations between the countries of Eastern and Western Europe. Especially after the [Cuban Missile Crisis](#) in 1962, the idea gained ground in both blocs that it was necessary to find common ground for dialogue in order to reduce the risk of conflict.

In July 1966, the [Warsaw Pact](#) countries (the Soviet Union and seven Eastern Bloc satellite states) hoped for a détente with Western Europe, proposing a continental conference of security and co-operation.

‘The Swiss are terrified by people who move too quickly’



Swiss Foreign Minister Willy Spühler visits the monastery of Cozia, Romania.

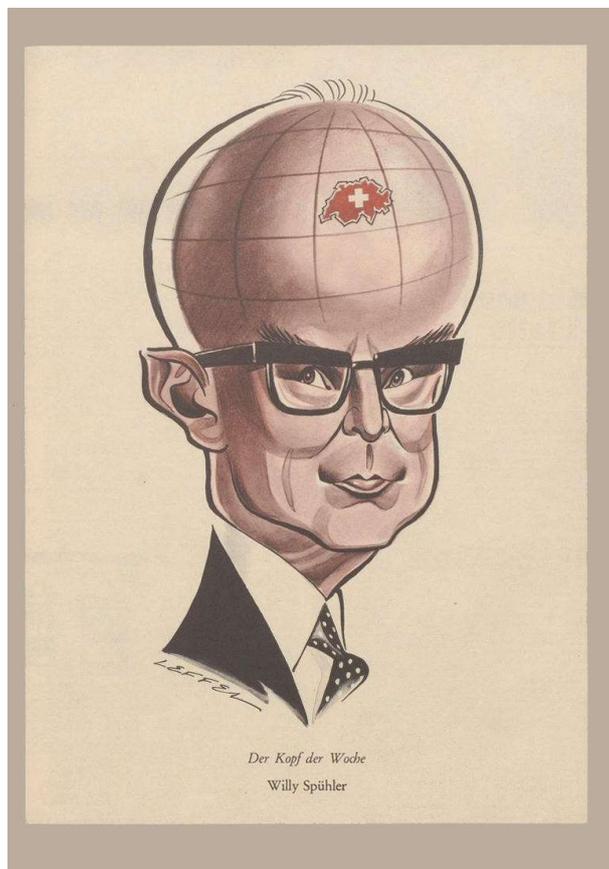
(SRF-SWI)

The Swiss visit to Romania was not the first such signal to come from “beyond the curtain”. This new dynamic in international relations meant Swiss diplomacy had to rethink its own relationship with Eastern Europe and raised the question of a possible visit to a country in the communist bloc.

“In principle, federal councillors didn’t often travel abroad at the time,” says Thomas Bürgisser at [Dodis](#), the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland database. In the Swiss republican tradition, members of the executive branch were not delegated tasks of political representation abroad.

The question of adapting diplomatic practice, particularly towards the countries of the communist bloc, was discussed at various points in 1966. The outcome of the discussions confirmed the traditional approach.

“The Swiss are terrified by people who move too quickly and by political gossip. Nor do they like dust being thrown in their eyes. So let’s stick with our discreet and serious diplomacy, which is not suited to spectacular visits,” [concluded Antonino Janner](#) in the federal political department.



A caricature of Willy Spühler in the satirical weekly *Nebelspalter*, 1967.

(Nebelspalter)

Willy Spühler, who took over the department in 1966, initially followed the recommendations of his officials. However, the possibility of a trip to Eastern Europe was merely postponed.

The ice was broken the same year by Rudolf Gnägi, head of the federal department of transport and energy, who travelled to the Soviet Union for the inauguration of the scheduled Swissair flight between Zurich and Moscow. There weren't any diplomatic talks, but the trip involved representing Switzerland and a precedent had been set.

'Greater openness'

In the following months a project for Spühler's trip to Romania took shape within the political department.

"Romania was particularly interesting for Switzerland because it was part of the Warsaw Pact but it followed a line that was very independent from Moscow," Bürgisser said.

Spühler arrived in Bucharest on the evening of April 18. The next day he [met his Romanian counterpart](#) Corneliu Mănescu. The talks focused on the planned conference on security in Europe.

Other bilateral and international political issues were addressed in talks with Prime Minister Ion Gheorghe Maurer and leader of the Romanian Communist Party Nicolae Ceaușescu, who was also president of the State Council.

From the point of view of bilateral relations, the visit of the Swiss foreign minister to Bucharest had a relatively modest impact.

"However, Spühler's journey marked the beginning of a normalisation of Swiss foreign policy," according to Sacha Zala, director of Dodis.

"Involvement in the conference on security and co-operation in Europe was a decisive step in the evolution of Swiss foreign policy towards greater openness."

(Translated from Italian and German by Thomas Stephens)