



## Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA

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From prisoner to president: Swiss diplomacy witnesses a  
moment in history

# From prisoner to president: Swiss diplomacy witnesses a moment in history

1989: with the Cold War at an end, Europe is in a state of upheaval. In Czechoslovakia, Václav Havel goes from prisoner to president in the space of a few months. For the first time, the general public will now be able to read striking accounts by Swiss diplomats that detail the events of this era. The documents are being published by the Dodis research centre. We spoke with its director, Sacha Zala.

24.11.2020

Europe

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On 16 January 1989, Václav Havel lays flowers on Wenceslas Square in Prague to remember Jan Palach, who burned himself to death there during the bloody suppression of the Prague Spring in 1969. © MD/Wikimedia

On Wenceslas Square in Prague, a man and his fellow activists lay flowers in remembrance of the bloody suppression of the Prague Spring. The memorial event is violently broken up by the police, and the man is arrested and imprisoned for 'incitement to obstruct the security forces'. By this point on 16 January 1989, he has already spent several years in jail due to his political activities.

Just under two years later, on 22 November 1990, the man has traded his cell for an official state car. The President of the Swiss Confederation, Arnold Koller, and Federal Councillors Otto Stich and René Felber are waiting to welcome him. The man's name is Václav Havel. He is a playwright and former dissident, and has been president of Czechoslovakia for a year. He is here for talks with the Swiss government about his country's relationship with Switzerland and about Czechoslovakia's role in a united Europe.



President Václav Havel (background centre) arrives in Bern at the start of a two-day visit to Switzerland. He is welcomed by the President of the Swiss Confederation, Arnold Koller (background right). © Dodis

Just like the life of Václav Havel, Czechoslovakia has also undergone a dramatic transformation in the past two years. The Communist regime has stepped down and reformers have taken over the business of government in their place. After 40 years of Communist dictatorship, the country is poised to become a Western-style democracy.

## Diplomats as Switzerland's window on the world

Switzerland's ambassador in Prague is following events closely: "It is a complete upheaval," he writes in a dispatch to Bern on 29 January 1990. His report is now being published along with other documents offering first-hand accounts of the dramatic turnaround in Czechoslovakia.



*It is a complete upheaval.*

Switzerland's ambassador in Prague, 29.01.1990



Much like the ambassador in Prague, other Swiss diplomats around the world are observing events in the countries where they are posted. The first-hand accounts they send home provide a window on the world to officials in Switzerland. As the decades pass, their efforts generate an impressive collection of historical documents.

## Switzerland's diplomatic memory bank

This collection now spans some 65 kilometres of shelf space in the Swiss Federal Archives. Sources include the Federal Council, the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) and the other departments of the Federal Administration, and public and private actors. The files can be viewed by anyone, but only be after a 30-year period of secrecy has elapsed – which is why the documents from 1990 are only being published now.

The independent research centre Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) sifts through the holdings of the Federal Archives and publishes a selection of historical documents on its Dodis online database, allowing us to revisit important events such as Václav Havel's visit to Bern and the upheaval in former Czechoslovakia. The Dodis research centre acts as a window on the past by offering historians and interested members of the public access to an introductory selection of historical sources.

Prof Dr Sacha Zala, the centre's director, answered a few of our questions on his work at Dodis.



Prof Dr Sacha Zala, director of Dodis © Sacha Zala

**Prof Dr Zala, Dodis has drawn our attention to the 30th anniversary of Václav Havel's visit to Bern. Could you use this example to explain the objectives of the centre's work?**

Our current subproject on the 1990s aims to publish official documents relating to Switzerland's international relations immediately after the expiration of the 30-year period of archival secrecy, as is done in a number of other countries. This allows us to present historical material that was previously inaccessible. Havel's visit is just one of many topics relating Swiss foreign relations in 1990 that can be found on Dodis from 1 January 2021.

**Dodis examines around 600 kilometres of records every year, selecting roughly 60 documents for the printed edition and around 1.500 others for the database. How do you go about doing this?**

The principle of collegiality in the Swiss government system means that all departments are either directly or indirectly involved in foreign policy issues. The FDFA's strategic archive holdings are vital for us, especially the minutes of Federal Council meetings and documents from any departments of the Federal Administration that are involved in international affairs through their work in

economics and finance, the environment, migration, transport, science, and culture. Our approach is to select those documents that offer the strongest coverage of a particular topic and invite the most questions.

**During your career, have you ever discovered something in a historical document that has surprised you personally?**

As is often the case, people only talk about the history of Swiss foreign affairs when some scandal – alleged or otherwise – has been uncovered. That's simply the sensationalist imperative of the media. If – like us – you've worked for decades on historical developments in Swiss foreign policy, you end up putting many of these so-called scandals into perspective. We carry out the groundwork behind the scenes that allows us to put these events into a wider context. In doing so, it becomes clear how strongly connected Switzerland is with the rest of the world.

## Links

Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis)  
research centre 

Swiss National Museum: President of the Poets in  
a Snowstorm 

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## Documents

[Memorandum: Visit to Switzerland of the  
President of the CSFR, Václav Havel, 21-](#)

23.01.1990 

Report by the Swiss ambassador in Prague,  
31.12.1989: 'La Tchécoslovaquie en 1989' 

Report by the Swiss ambassador in Prague,  
29.01.1990: 'Havel au château' 

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