



President of the Confederation Adolf Ogi and Helmut Kohl at a meeting in October 1993. Flavio Cotti and Kaspar Villiger look on.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

Ogi's European charm offensive

In 1993, the Federal Council launched a charm offensive, fronted by Switzerland's president Ogi, to pave the way for bilateral negotiations with the EU following the historic outcome of the EEA referendum of 6 December 1992.



Thomas Bürgisser →
Thomas Bürgisser is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland (Dodis) research centre.

They are all trying to outsmile one another: a tanned and energetic Adolf Ogi, Transport Minister and President of the Swiss Confederation, is determined to look German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a veritable giant of a man, straight in the eye as they shake hands. Standing to the side, like a couple of schoolboys, are Federal Councillors Kaspar Villiger and Flavio Cotti. Behind them, the entrance to the Lohn villa, a manor house in the village of Kehrsatz near Bern that is used by the Federal Council to host official guests. The Swiss government has been receiving high-ranking dignitaries from around the world at the Lohn estate for decades. On 18 October 1993, the guest in question was Helmut Kohl, Germany's reunification chancellor and a heavyweight in European politics since the end of the Cold War.

Chancellor Kohl described himself as a friend of the Swiss Confederation. And Switzerland was in desperate need of friends at the time. On 6 December 1992, the Swiss electorate had rejected proposals for the country to become a member of the *European Economic Area (EEA)*. The Federal Council was openly in favour of acceding to the EEA, seeing this as a step towards closely integrating Switzerland into the growing European Community. It had resolved on membership of the EU as a strategic goal in the autumn of 1991 - an objective in need of a rethink following the vote against ratifying the EEA Agreement. Therefore, in 1993, the Federal Council - acting *contre coeur* - was faced with the task of persuading Brussels and the member states to accept Switzerland as a special case with regard to European integration, at least temporarily.



Helmut Kohl, a friend of Switzerland, and Adolf Ogi answering questions at a press conference.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

The meeting of 18 October had been arranged during a private visit by Kohl to the Locarno Film Festival that August. Unusually, the talks between Kohl and the Federal Council delegation took place in camera, with no staff or diplomats present to take minutes and keep an official record of what was discussed. Keywords jotted down by head of state Ogi can be found in the archives, while Federal Councillor Villiger published his own memories of the meeting in his autobiography: European integration and Germany's role were the topics on the agenda. Along with Switzerland's situation, of course. In a thank-you letter to Kohl, Ogi reiterated Switzerland's priorities in the upcoming bilateral negotiations with the EU.

EC or EU?

The *European Community (EC)* was formed in 1967 as an amalgamation of the European Economic Community, Euratom and the European Coal and Steel Community. The entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty on 1 November 1993 made the EC the main pillar of the newly established *European Union (EU)*. The *European Free Trade Association (EFTA)* was founded by Switzerland and another six nations in 1960 as a reaction to the process of European integration. The *European Economic Area (EEA)* was originally conceived in 1989 as an umbrella covering the EC and EFTA. After Switzerland rejected the EEA Agreement and fellow EFTA member states Austria, Sweden and Finland joined the EU in 1995, its significance waned rapidly.

The task now was to get the EU to offer Switzerland the most favourable conditions possible under bilateral agreements to be negotiated on a sector-by-sector basis, a procedure that had not actually been envisaged by the European side. After all, in the wake of the fall of the 'Iron Curtain' in 1989/90, all of Europe's countries were clamouring to become EU members. Especially Switzerland's neutral partners Austria, Sweden and Finland, who were all members of the formerly powerful Free Trade Association. This left EFTA facing near-total collapse.

But the newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe were also seeking to establish ties with the EU. Therefore, although Chancellor Kohl had every sympathy for the unique situation of the Swiss Confederation, he found that "simple common sense dictates that Switzerland must soon change course and apply for EC membership". "In the long term, the Swiss will get nowhere by being stubborn," he warned the gathering at the Lohn estate.



British prime minister John Major officially greeting Adolf Ogi in Bern in 1993.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

And so, in June, Foreign Minister Cotti and Minister for Economic Affairs Jean-Pascal Delamuraz argued before the EC Commission in Brussels that the bilateral approach was "inadequate and provisional" and that the goal remained EU membership. But to achieve this, they contended that it was important for the EC "to present a conciliatory image to the Swiss people" by taking an accommodative stance on the bilateral agreements with Switzerland.

The members of the Federal Council were to repeat this mantra ad nauseum throughout 1993 at an unprecedented number of meetings with Europe's top politicians.

Head of state Ogi did it in January at the *World Economic Forum (WEF)* in Davos and again in the spring, with backing from Federal Councillors Cotti and Delamuraz, during a working visit to Bern by British prime minister John Major. In June, while visiting Paris, Ogi was unexpectedly received by French president François Mitterrand at the Élysée Palace. Ogi immediately invited Mitterrand to come and visit him in his home village in the Bâle canton, which the Frenchman did on 3 December. Ogi greeted Mitterrand in typically disarming fashion with the words: "Monsieur le Président, vous aimez la Suisse, et les Suisses vous aiment [Mr President, you love Switzerland, and the Swiss love you]".



Adolf Ogi enticed François Mitterrand to Kandersteg (in German).
SRF

The EC Council of Ministers agreed on 9 November to enter into the negotiations proposed by Switzerland. The first hurdle had been cleared. Referring to the "thaw" in relations with Brussels, Federal Councillor Cotti, the then head of the *Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA)*, stated that "good advocates" had spoken up on Switzerland's behalf within the EC "even if they couldn't exactly be called friends".

This was not something that could have been taken for granted. The EC member states from southern Europe in particular put strong pressure on Switzerland. Portugal's prime minister Anibal Cavaco Silva had already expressed his disappointment at the vote against the EEA at the WEF, and gave him to understand that he now expected Switzerland to make "certain gestures, for example with regard to family reunification (guest workers) or cohesion".

As it turned out, Lisbon was using Bern's status as a petitioner in the bilateral agreements as leverage in the affair surrounding the disposal of several thousand tonnes of salt slag that a Swiss company had exported to Portugal. Although Ambassador Franz von Däniken, the leading official at the FDFA, recognised that exporting industrial waste was a problematic business, he found that "Making such a problem the focus of bilateral relations with another, supposedly friendly western European nation and attempting to solve it by referring to Switzerland's integration policy concerns in an approach tantamount to blackmail, shows bad taste and defies all sense of proportion".



Following the vote against the EEA in December 1992...
Swiss National Museum / ASL



... Switzerland's President Adolf Ogi used his charm as a 'life belt' for Swiss foreign policy.
Swiss National Museum / ASL

The toughest partner at the table when it came to approving mandates for bilateral negotiations between Switzerland and the EC was Spain. Madrid exploited Bern's weak negotiating position to come to an accommodation on Spain's request regarding agricultural exports of cheese, meat and alcoholic beverages, and to bring about an improvement in the situation of Spanish guest workers in Switzerland. In mid-December, Switzerland's president Ogi travelled to Madrid at the invitation of the Spanish king in order to join prime minister Felipe Gonzalez in heralding a positive new beginning to the bilateral relations. Thus, as the year drew to a close, the path ahead actually seemed clear for Switzerland to enter into bilateral negotiations with the EU on certain sectors - barriers to trade, transport, research, the free movement of persons, and agricultural trade. Nevertheless, the adoption of the Bilateral Agreements I package in 1999 would prove a long way off. How the journey continued will be revealed by the records released to the public on 1 January 2025.

Joint research

This text is the product of a collaboration between the Swiss National Museum (SNM) and the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland Research Centre (Dodis). The SNM researches images relating to Swiss foreign policy in the archives of the Agency Actualités Suisses de Lausanne (ASL) and Dodis contextualises these photographs on the basis of official source material. The files for 1993 were published on the Dodis internet database on 1 January 2024. The documents cited in the text and other files from the volume Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland 1993 are available online.