In 1994 the Federal Council (pictured here from I. to r., Arnold Koller, Otto Stich and Flavio Cotti) suffered a few setbacks in referendums. Swiss National Museum / ASL

Outwardly open, inwardly closed

The degree to which Swiss domestic and foreign policy are intertwined has seldom become so apparent as in 1994. That year, the electorate repeatedly opposed the Federal Council's pursuit of international openness.

he 'no' vote on 6 December 1992 to joining the European Economic Area (EEA) proved

bombshell came on 20 February when the electorate unexpectedly approved the Alps

not to be an aberration. 1994 was the year the Federal Council realised that the

international slant of its policies faced strong systematic resistance. The first

Initiative against the federal government's recommendation. Implementation of the new article in

the Swiss constitution designed to protect the alpine regions from transit traffic called the Land

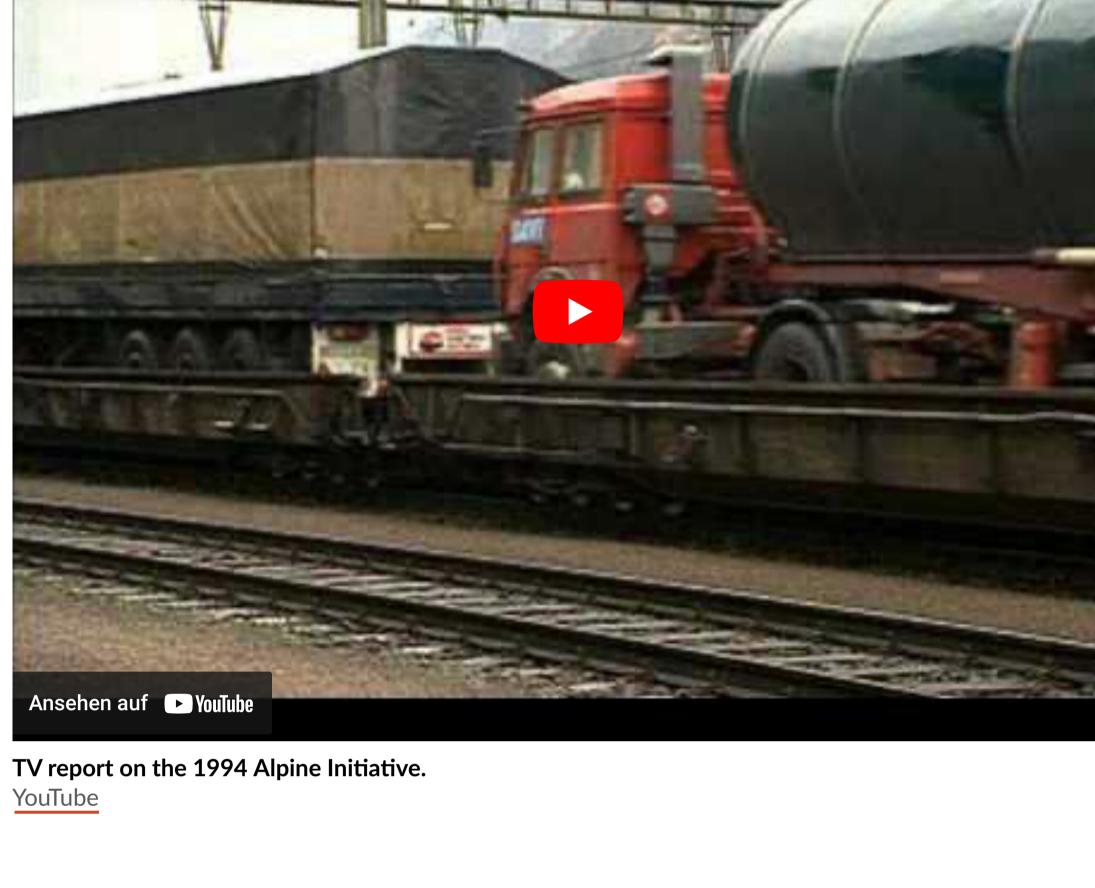
Transport Agreement with the European Union (EU) into question and weakened Switzerland's



Thomas Bürgisser → Thomas Bürgisser is a historian at the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland

(Dodis) research centre.

negotiating position with regard to the problematic transport dossier. The outcome of the referendum cast doubt on Switzerland's reliability as a partner in the eyes of Europe. Brussels promptly called a temporary halt to the groundwork being laid for negotiations on bilateral sectoral agreements, which Switzerland hoped to conclude with the EU as compensation for not joining the EEA. The Federal Council had once again been thwarted by its own people.



The situation became even clearer on 12 June. All three proposals put forward by the federal government failed at the ballot box. The articles on promoting culture and simplifying the naturalisation procedure for young foreigners were both rejected by the electorate and cantons alike. The most resounding defeat was the 57% 'no' vote against the Federal Act on deploying Swiss troops in peacekeeping operations. This meant that no Swiss battalion of Blue Helmets could be made available to the UN. But the 'no' vote also appeared to question the direction taken by the Federal Council in its attempts to further open Swiss foreign and security policy in general. The results of these three referendums left the Federal Council facing a general loss of trust and

confidence. A crisis meeting was called, at which members of the government went on record as saying that the country was divided. According to Federal Councillor and Head of the Department of Foreign Affairs Flavio Cotti, the political system in Switzerland now confronted a new kind of opposition, embodied by the biggest winner of the EEA referendum, Zurich SVP politician and member of the National Council Christoph Blocher, and his "erosive power". Cotti defiantly stated for the record that: "The worst thing we could do would be to give up, admit that Blocher is right and capitulate in our foreign policy efforts."



Switzerland's international relations were also threatened by far right attacks on its asylum

policy. Xenophobic rallying cries stoked the public debate about abuses of the refugee system and about asylum and immigration in general. If adopted, the popular initiative "for a sensible asylum policy", launched by nationalist political party the Swiss Democrats in 1990, would have forced Switzerland to turn its back on the principle of non-refoulement, which ensures that a refugee is not deported to a country in which they will face persecution. Switzerland had already signed up to this norm in various international conventions. In November 1994, Swiss Federal Councillor and Justice Minister Arnold Koller therefore recommended to the Council of States Political Institutions Committee that the initiative should

not be put to a national referendum. In the event of such a "complete departure from our country's humanitarian tradition," in the words of Arnold Koller, "we would cease to be a state based on the rule of law, and would find ourselves isolated internationally." For the first time ever, the Federal Council wished to declare a popular initiative invalid due to its incompatibility with Switzerland's commitments under international law. The Swiss parliament followed this recommendation in March 1996. To placate those expressing criticism, Federal Councillor Koller based his argument on the fact that asylum figures had fallen since the initiative was first submitted, and promised that the government would enact new coercive measures for deporting criminal asylum-seekers and foreign nationals. Bundesrat stellt sich vor Schutzbedürftige

Die SD-«Asyl-Initiative» wurde wegen Vökerrechtsbruchs ungültig erklärt len Volksbegehren der SVP. Die SDber umgehend und ohne Beschwer-(sda) Der Bundesrat will nichts demöglichkeit aus der Schweiz weg-Initiative «für eine vernünftige Asylwissen von einer Schweizer Asyl-

politik» und die SVP-Initiative «gegen zuweisen. Nicht länger würde also gepolitik, die höchste Rechtsgüter prüft, ob die Betroffenen damit der podie illegale Einwanderung» verfolgen verletzt und zwingendem Völmit unterschiedlichen Mitteln das gleilitischen Verfolgung, der Folter oder kerrecht widerspricht. Nach sei-

che Ziel, die illegale Einwanderung

nem Willen soll das Parlament die Asyl-Initiative der Schweizer Demokraten (SD) ungültig erklären. Nein ohne Gegenvorschlag sagt die Landesregierung zum weniger radika-Tagblatt newspaper of 24 June 1994. e-newspaperarchives

und den Missbrauch des Asylrechts zu bekämpfen. Eine radikale Abkehr von der heutigen Asylpolitik fordern die Schweizer Demokraten. Vor allem soll es möglich werden, illegal eingereiste Asylbewer-Arnold Koller and the Federal Council get their way: the Swiss Democrats' Asylum Initiative was declared invalid. Front page of the Thuner

Diese zentrale Forderung war für den Bundesrat der Grund, die Ungültigkeit der Initiative zu beantragen. «Wenn wir hier nicht auf Ungültigkeit entscheiden, dann nie mehr», sagte Justizminister Arnold Koller.

gar dem Tod ausgesetzt wären.

Finally, Switzerland's accession to the United Nations Anti-Racism Convention became a political hot potato. The transposition of the UN provisions into Swiss law necessitated changes to its

and an undesired rapprochement with the UN. A topic like this provided ideal fodder for Arena, the political discussion show launched by public broadcaster Schweizer Fernsehen in the summer of 1993. The programme had quickly established itself as a key forum for debating both domestic and foreign policy issues in a way that held audience appeal. At yet another meeting, the national government discussed whether and how members of the Federal Council should take part in this unusual new format. Transport Minister Adolf Ogi was still licking his wounds after his unfortunate appearance on the show dedicated to the Alps

Initiative and Federal Councillor Kaspar Villiger - who had refused to participate in the Arena

members of the government should take part "in ringside battles with parliamentarians". For Otto

Stich, the incumbent Swiss President in 1994, "participation in adversarial broadcasts" was not a

discussion on the Blue Helmets proposal – posed the fundamental question of whether

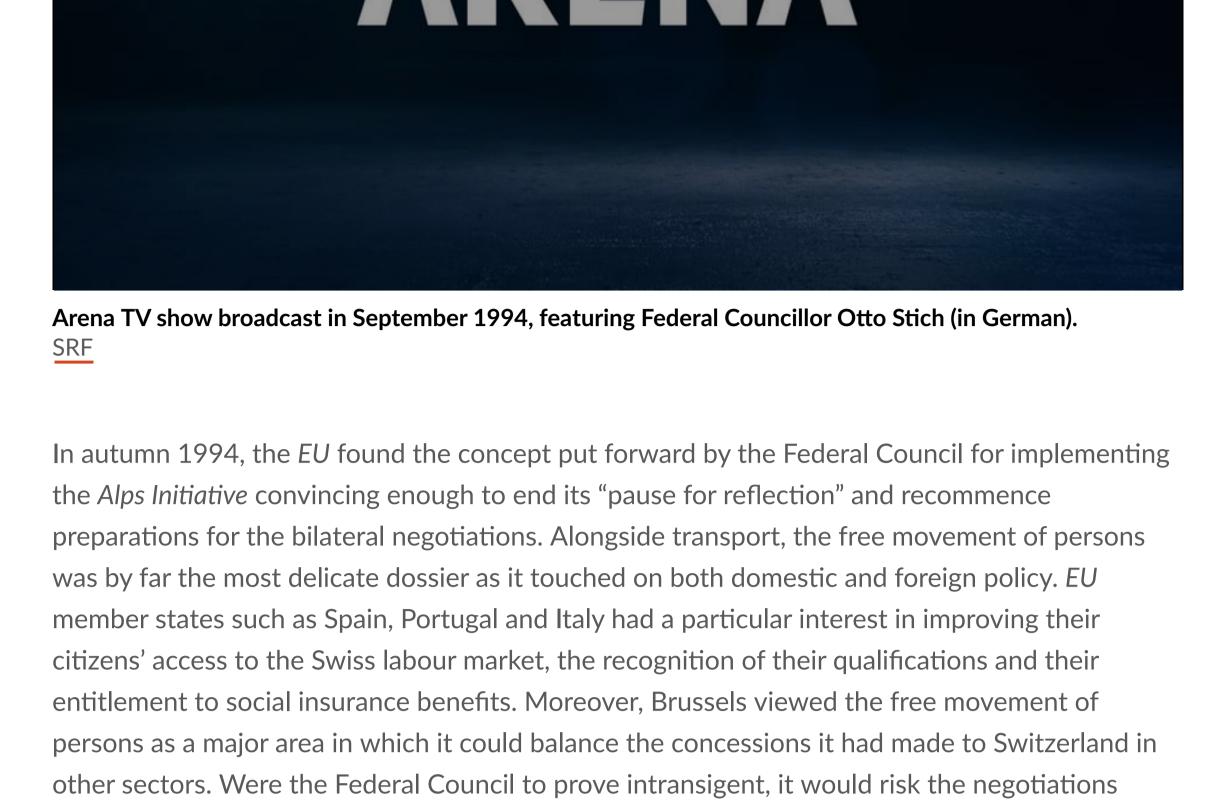
problem. He offered to step into the ring on 16 September and go toe to toe with the

Criminal Code, and a referendum was called opposing the introduction of the new article. During

Swiss Democrats warned that it would lead to unlawful restrictions on the freedom of expression

the referendum campaign, the right-wing populist Freedom Party, the Lega dei Ticinesi and the

opponents. The unpretentious performance given on Arena by this seemingly strait-laced Social Democrat from the canton of Solothurn, who as Finance Minister championed a strict policy of cutbacks, may have helped the anti-racism penal provision (narrowly) gain acceptance. **Antirassismus-Gesetz**



being called off by the EU.

of the free movement of persons.

Conversely, the by now omnipresent Blocher had already threatened to call for a referendum if

too many concessions were made in the agreement. The Swiss Trade Union Federation also put

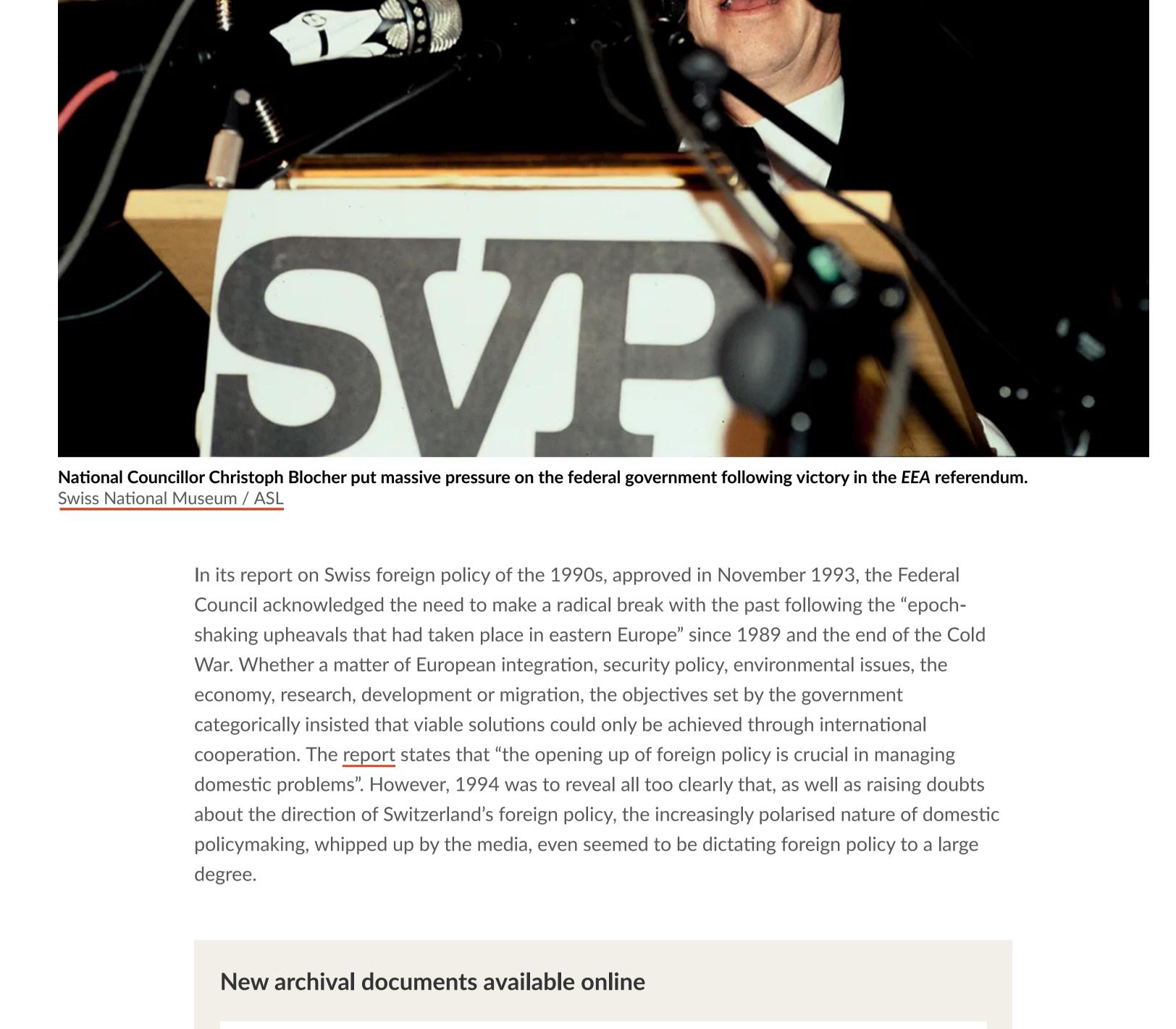
pressure on the government by issuing a letter in which it gave an ultimatum for accompanying

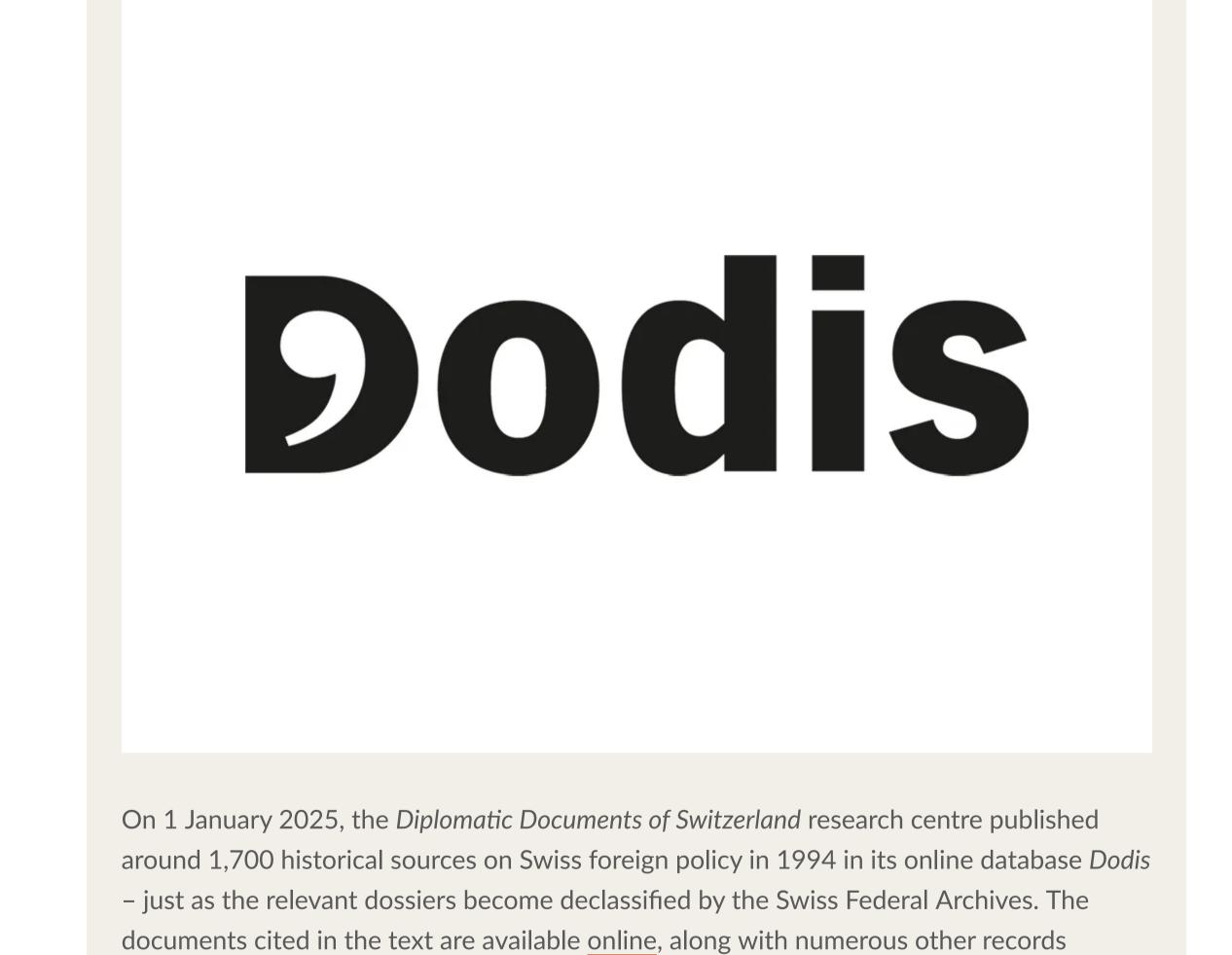
measures to be put in place to ensure that the hoped-for liberalisation would not lead to wage

was therefore forced to choose between "two evils". Taking domestic policy into account, it

and social dumping. When the Federal Council adopted its negotiation mandate in December, it

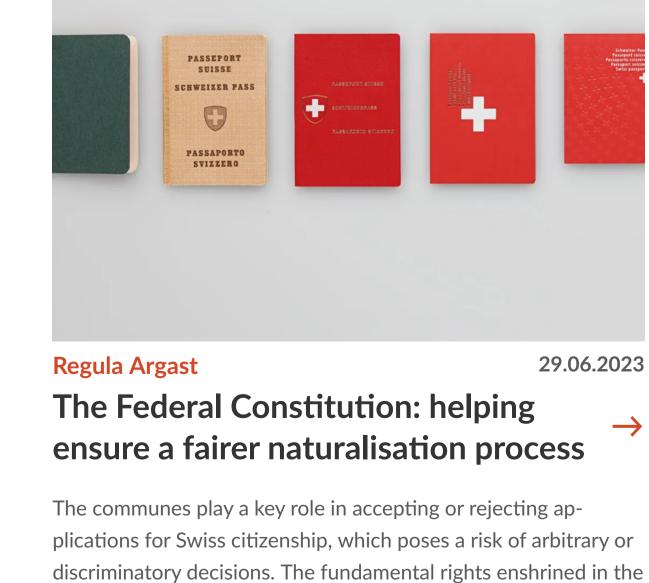
ultimately decided to grant its negotiators only limited room for manoeuvre in certain sub-areas





relating to Switzerland's international relations.

Further posts



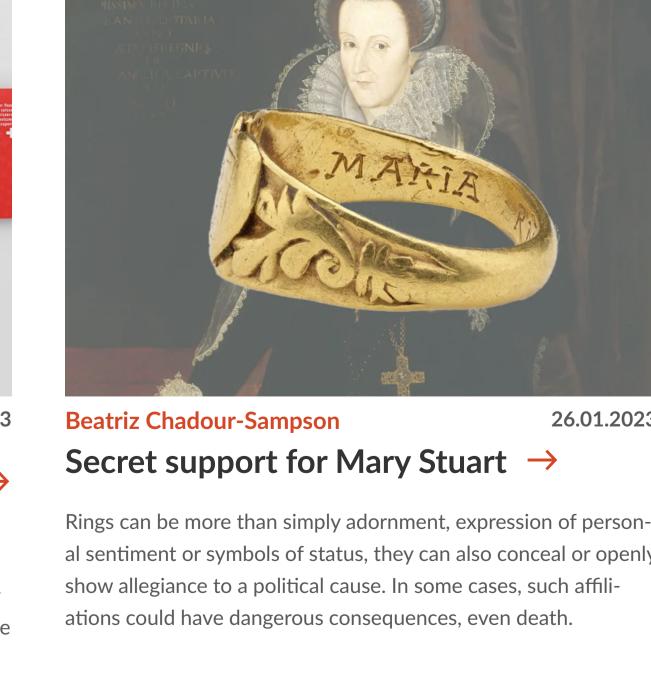
Federal Constitution serve as an important corrective.

Address & contact

Swiss National Museum

Landesmuseum Zürich

Museumstrasse 2





Swiss National Museum

Privacy policy

Show all categories



Museum (SNM). RSS-Feed

P.O. Box 8021 Zurich info@nationalmuseum.ch www.nationalmuseum.ch

Design: dreipol | Realisation: whatwedo

© 2024 Swiss National Museum

Three museums - the National Museum Zurich, the Château de Prangins and the Forum of Swiss History Schwyz - as well as the Collection Centre in Affoltern am Albis – are united under the umbrella of the Swiss National