

talking points.

The FDFA's take on current events



Dear reader

Diplomacy, like dance, is all about taking careful steps. This month's newsletter invites you on a journey from Locarno to Port-au-Prince via Helsinki and Bern – with a stopover at the Ambassadors' Conference, where two ministers made an appearance in the family photo – can you spot them?

The tectonic plates of geopolitics continue to shift, but Switzerland stays true to its tradition and keeps a steady tempo – close to its neighbours but not joined at the hip, and always ready to adopt a pragmatic approach.

We also look back on 50 years of the Helsinki Final Act – a timely reminder that diplomacy is a marathon rather than a sprint. And speaking of resilience: our colleagues in Haiti show us every day that diplomacy is also about showing quiet courage on the ground.

Happy reading – and let's keep up the tempo!

Nicolas Bideau
Head of FDFA Communication

let's get to the point.

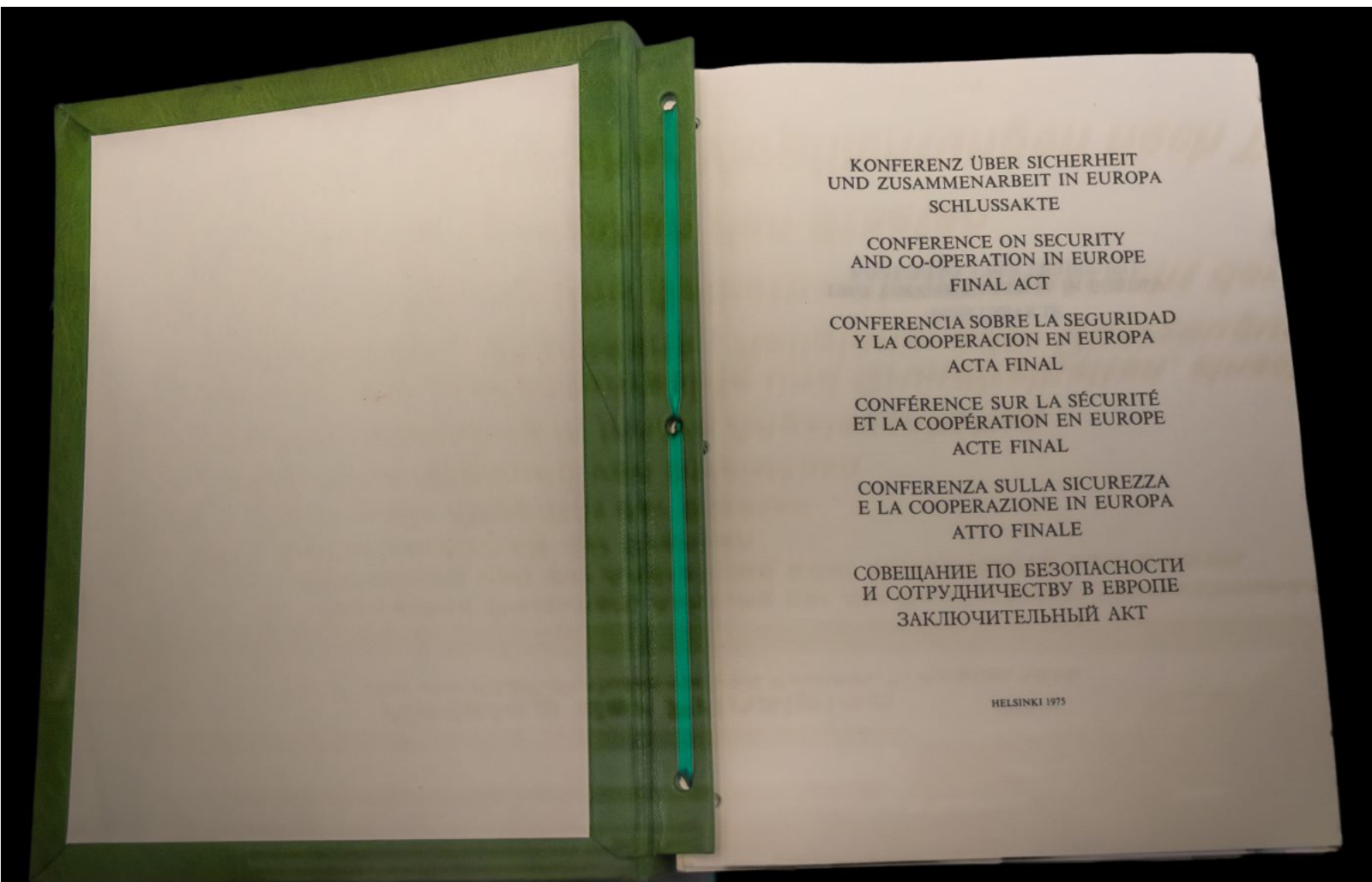
50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act (1 August 1975)

On 1 August 1975, 35 heads of state gathered in Helsinki. Among them was the president of the Swiss Confederation, Pierre Graber – no doubt happy to celebrate his country's national day in such distinguished company. He must also have been struck – perhaps even moved – by a sense of history as the **assembly sat in a semicircle, a row of ferns at their feet**, and signed the document.



Thomas Bürgisser of the Dodis research centre on Swiss diplomatic documents believes the final declaration of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) is perhaps the greatest success of European Cold War diplomacy. The fact that the United States, Canada and representatives of all Western and Eastern European nations, including the Soviet Union, came together in the midst of the Cold War and committed to respecting a set of common rules and values is truly remarkable.

But this success did not come about on its own: high-level diplomacy and months of tough negotiations on specific wording were needed before the **Helsinki Final Act** was signed. Although the 80-page code of conduct is not binding under international law, its signatory states nonetheless agreed to pay due regard to and implement the provisions. In that summer of 1975, the Soviet Union and its allies confirmed their territorial sovereignty and the inviolability of their borders, while the West received key concessions on respect for human rights.



New impetus for Swiss foreign policy

According to legend, the Swiss Confederation was founded on 1 August 1291. The significance of 1 August 1975 was so great, though, that it can also be seen as a founding day – for a new kind of Swiss foreign policy. There were lively discussions at the national level: thanks to the efforts of the FDFA's predecessor, the Federal Political Department (FDP), the Federal Council decided to support Switzerland's participation in the CSCE (cf. dodis.ch/34487), reasoning that Switzerland would thus remain faithful to the 'fundamentals of its policy of neutrality, solidarity, openness and cooperation' (dodis.ch/34499).

Once Bern gave the green light, the FDP's diplomatic efforts quickly bore fruit: Geneva was chosen to host the principal CSCE negotiations between September 1973 and May 1975. Switzerland emerged as a serious host country, an active participant and a valued mediator (dodis.ch/38816) in the febrile setting of the negotiations. The aim was to maintain a bridge between the United States and the USSR, comparable to a two-headed hydra whose body was a united Europe and whose willingness to compromise would seal the fate of the negotiations and shape the CSCE and the OSCE after it. "In these pivotal moments, Swiss diplomats helped move the negotiations towards a result that was acceptable to all parties," explains Thomas Bürgisser.

Bürgisser believes the CSCE helped to establish Swiss foreign policy as an active, visible and recognised force, and to leave behind the idea of Switzerland as a Sonderfall – a special and somewhat marginal case among the world's nations. It is worth noting that until Switzerland joined the UN in 2002, the CSCE (which became the OSCE in 1994) was the only truly political multilateral forum in which Switzerland participated.

From hope to disillusion: Helsinki put to the test over 50 years

In Geneva and then in Helsinki, the work was in reality just beginning, as **President of the Swiss Confederation Pierre Graber** emphasised in his address to heads of state and government at Finlandia Hall on 1 August 1975 (dodis.ch/38875). In the years to come, Swiss prudence was to prove well advised: this remarkable yet fragile compromise between two blocs intent on dominating a single region was unable to prevent the worsening of Cold War tensions.



New impetus for Swiss foreign policy

The family of European nations nonetheless managed to maintain a balance along the East/West divide until the collapse of Communism on the continent between 1989 and 1991. Unfortunately the geopolitical thaw could not prevent the return of hostilities to Europe and the outbreak of war in the Balkans. The idea that the post-communist age of liberal democracy would usher in the 'end of history' – as Francis Fukuyama suggested in 1989 – had turned out to be an illusion. The war that began on 24 February 2022 in Ukraine provides a sad reminder of that defeated hope.

Switzerland chairs the OSCE: 1996, 2014, 2026

Today, Switzerland is preparing for another term as chair of the OSCE. But what is left of the spirit of Helsinki when the organisation is paralysed by Russia's veto? Is this vulnerability actually a hidden strength? The OSCE is currently the only European intergovernmental organisation in which Russia still participates. As Thomas Bürgisser explains, this is because OSCE decisions require consensus, because the organisation has no army, and because it has no power to impose sanctions. The fact that the OSCE operates under these conditions – with no deterrent effects – has kept Putin's Russia at the table since his military intervention in Ukraine began in 2022.

It is most likely under these conditions, too, that Switzerland will begin its third term chairing the organisation in 2026. It will continue its work to support peace and security in Europe, building on its experience in 1996, which was marked by the Dayton Agreements and war in Chechnya, and in 2014, the year of the annexation of Crimea and war in eastern Ukraine.

At first glance, the OSCE's chances of bringing peace to Europe might seem slim. But it would still be a success if Switzerland, as in 1975, brought together all 57 current members for a frank discussion on rebuilding the European security architecture and on the conditions for achieving lasting peace between nations with different political, economic and social systems. And, to echo Pierre Graber's words on 1 August 1975, it would offer us another reason to hope (dodis.ch/38867).

In September 2025, Switzerland presented its [priorities](#) for its OSCE Chairmanship in 2026 to the OSCE in Vienna.