

The Power of Chocolate

By Sabine Nölke

One of the challenges during summits is organizing “bilaterals on the margins” for the main players. In 1999, I was posted to the Canadian Delegation to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Vienna—just in time for the OSCE Summit in Istanbul. The Summit brought together 55 heads of government—plus ministers—from Canada, the United States, Europe and Russia, as well as from all of the newly minted states of the former U.S.S.R. and a still-disintegrating Yugoslavia. The day before our departure for Turkey, I was told that, in addition to completing negotiations on the new post-Warsaw Pact version of the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, I was to be in charge of arranging all bilaterals for Prime Minister Jean Chrétien and Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy. Let the juggling begin!

The biggest challenges were wrangling firm time slots from equally harried counterparts and finding meeting rooms in the posh pinkness of the Ciragan Palace. I spent 12 days with a cellphone glued to my ear. (The bill came to 75 million Turkish lira—try fitting that many digits into a travel claim.)

Just before the two-day summit, I had finally filled my dance card with 19 meetings (not counting “brush-bys”). However, the plenary meeting started late, and not a single speaker stuck to the 10-minute time limit. The PM’s first bilateral ended up scheduled for the time he would be speaking. With cell service still spotty after the earthquake (don’t ask), I ran to the appointed room to leave a note for the Belgians. Two of them were already there, riffling through notes. Happily, I asked whether they could get a message to their PM, as mine would be half an hour late. The elder, pointing at his young companion, said, “Why don’t you tell him yourself?” Whoops.



Of my 19 scheduled meetings, only two took place at the appointed time and place. That I survived with my sanity intact I owe to a box of Godiva chocolates, which I had bought out of sympathy for the harried souls booking the meeting rooms, who hadn’t slept or eaten in days. That was the best investment ever! Not only did they bounce numerous EU states from rooms to accommodate my ever-changing needs, they gave me a list of “off-the-grid” places to be used in a pinch. So the Minister was able to have an impromptu chat with members of the Serbian opposition in a quiet area under a pink marble staircase (some Bulgarians kindly gave up their lunch spot). I also found a charming, rustic basement room, the old palace kitchen, I believe, for the PM’s meeting with the Ukrainian president.

I’m sure many of my colleagues have danced this dance. But for those who have not yet had the pleasure—bring chocolate!

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