

Neutrality or NATO?

Founding meeting of the “Movement for Neutrality”

by Daniel Funk, “Transition News”

The “Movement for Neutrality” was founded on 9 March. The new organisation’s first goal is to help the cross-party neutrality initiative to succeed in getting neutrality enshrined in the Federal Constitution.



Since February 2022, everything has changed. While Switzerland was generally perceived as a neutral state until that date, the situation has changed since then. The Federal Council, the Swiss national government, has been trying to make neutrality more “flexible” since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine.

Simply put, it is bringing the country closer to NATO. Regarding the EU’s sanctions against Russia, the Federal Council hesitated for a few days but then – presumably under strong pressure from NATO and the EU – went along with them almost entirely. Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis coined the paradox of “cooperative neutrality” for this.¹

Switzerland has always respected the law of neutrality. It is regulated in the relevant *Hague Convention of 1907* and obliges the neutral state not to favour any party to an international war militarily. But neutrality is also a matter of perception.

During the Cold War, Switzerland was also firmly in the Western camp. Nevertheless, it was perceived as neutral by all sides because it stayed away from military alliances and only partially supported sanctions.

Later, the country acted in the same way. During the war in Bosnia, it granted NATO overflight rights because this mission was authorised by the UN Security Council and was therefore legal. By contrast, the NATO planes that bombed Serbia a few years later² had to fly around Switzerland. Since the UN Security Council did not authorise it, it is to be considered a war of aggression.

Such subtleties are perceived in international diplomacy. But that ended in February 2022. That is why Switzerland is no longer perceived as a neutral player in important parts of the world. In April 2024, Russian Foreign Minister

Sergei Lavrov even described Switzerland as an “openly hostile country”.³

Neutrality does not mean a lack of opinion, as the Nazis unsuccessfully demanded of Switzerland during the Second World War. Of course a neutral country is allowed to take a position. Of course the country and its citizens are allowed to have and express an opinion.

But in a conflict, politics must try to understand the position of all parties, although understanding does not mean approval. If it does that, it can provide “good offices”, a neutral negotiating platform and protect the interests of hostile countries – which Switzerland has been doing for many years in the US/Iran relationship.

That is why the movement for neutrality *bene.swiss*,⁴ founded on 9 March, advocates a *Switzerland of good offices*, in other words, an active, committed neutrality. If Switzerland had kept a slightly greater distance from NATO and the EU over the last three years, the current negotiations might not be taking place in Saudi Arabia and Turkey, but in Geneva.

In domestic politics, neutrality also provides “good offices”. During the First World War, Switzerland was politically divided. German-speaking Switzerland sided with the German Empire, while French-speaking Switzerland was more inclined towards France.

In his famous speech on 14 December 1914, *Carl Spitteler*,* who was one of the most famous writers of the time, called on Switzerland to maintain neutrality. Neutrality is therefore crucial, especially in times of crisis, to ensure that Switzerland’s internal peace is maintained.

Without neutrality, the Swiss would no longer be able to determine the fate of their country themselves. Switzerland has been neutral to varying degrees for about 500 years, internation-

ally officially recognised at the *Congress of Vienna* and in the *Treaties of Versailles*.

Neutrality is therefore firmly rooted in the Swiss population. It is part of our country's DNA. It is so self-evident that it has so far only been mentioned in passing in the federal constitution. Official Switzerland therefore does not dare to question it completely. Joining an alliance like NATO would require a referendum in which a majority of voters and a majority of the cantons would have to agree – a high hurdle that would almost certainly cause the request to fail.

That is why a phalanx of the government, almost all parties, associations and the media is currently trying to bring Switzerland closer to NATO by adopting sanctions and the like.

To counteract this trend, the *Neutrality Initiative*⁵ was launched some time ago. The media has always wrongly referred to it as an initiative of the *Swiss People's Party* (SVP). In fact, Switzerland's largest party was very much committed to this popular initiative and also provided a large proportion of the signatures. However, the impetus and the idea came from a different source.

The Movement for Neutrality was launched to give the initiative a broader base. Its aim is to broaden the political and societal support for the proposal and to help it achieve a breakthrough at the ballot box. If a majority of voters and cantons approve it in about a year's time, the text of the initiative will become constitutional and binding for the Federal Council.

Maintaining Switzerland's proven neutrality is a question of internal and external peace. By preserving it, the division of the population in this regard can be overcome. If it continues to be "flexibilised" step by step, then there is a danger that sooner or later Switzerland too will be forced into foreign wars or into expensive militarisation.

Neutrality does not mean standing on the sidelines and doing business. Active neutrality – which is what *bene.swiss* is committed to – means speaking up for international law, mediating and acting as a country of good offices. *Bene.swiss* is planned as a grassroots movement. On the movement's website, you can see how and where you can get involved.⁶

Source: <https://bene-schweiz.info/transition-news-berichtet-ueber-die-gruendungsversammlung-der-bewegung-fuer-neutralitaet/>, 11 March 2025

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/neue-neutralitaets-definition-kooperative-neutralitaet-cassis-ueberrascht-mit-neuem-begriff>

² <https://transition-news.org/humanitare-bomben-auf-serbien-teil-1>

³ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/russischer-aussenminister-bezeichnet-schweiz-als-%22offen-feindselig%22/76037916>

⁴ <https://bene-schweiz.info>

⁵ <https://neutralitaet-ja.ch/>

⁶ <https://bene-schweiz.info/#gruppen>

* <https://swiss-standpoint.ch/news-detailansicht-en-schweiz/neutrality-has-nothing-to-do-with-heartlessness-and-lack-of-solidarity.html>