How can peace ethics succeed?

The example of the CSCE process and Swiss neutrality

*by René Roca**

René Roca. (Picture ma)

Switzerland remained permanently neutral during the Cold War (1949–1991). This way, it helped to initiate reconciliation processes in many conflicts. Switzerland served not only its own country but also Europe and the world in terms of peace policy. At that time, Switzerland was a diplomatic great power.

Since the end of the Cold War, Switzerland has experienced an erosion of neutrality. Already during the First Gulf War in 1991, Switzerland adopted the UN's economic sanctions against Iraq, even though it was not yet a member of this body. By doing so, it returned, according to its own assessment, to so-called "differential" neutrality—meaning it was willing to make concessions on neutrality.

The economic sanctions against Iraq are well known to have had devastating effects on the civilian population, especially children. Between 1991 and 2001, according to UN organisations such as UNICEF or the WHO, and especially according to the reports of *Hans-Christof von Sponeck,* the former coordinator of the UN's humanitarian aid program for Iraq, more than one million people died, including more than 500,000 children under the age of five. The reasons were shortages of food and medical aid such as medicines. Switzerland bears part of the responsibility here because it supported the sanctions. That had nothing to do with neutrality anymore.

The erosion of neutrality continued throughout the 1990s, until it was practically pulverised with the adoption of the EU's sanctions packages against Russia from March 2022, in the

Signing of the CSCE Final Act in Helsinki in August 1975: West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and East German State Council Chairman Erich Honecker sign the Final Act, US President Gerald Ford and Austrian Chancellor Bruno Kreisky look on (from front, left to right). (Picture Wikimedia/CC-By-SA 3.0)

context of the war in Ukraine. This death blow to neutrality was the reason why a cross-party working group launched the "Popular initiative to safeguard Swiss neutrality". It was submitted in Bern on 11 April 2024, with just under 130,000 valid signatures.

The Swiss government, the Federal Council, rejects this initiative and noted in its official message that it wants to continue handling neutrality "flexibly". The parliamentary process is now underway. But even if the government, parliament, and even all the parties reject the initiative, it will still be put to a vote next year. That is living democracy in Switzerland—the people have the final say!

The referendum campaign has been ongoing since 11 April 2024 and has sparked a lively debate in Switzerland. Every initiative has what is called a "pre-effect". That means that the very act of submitting an initiative ensures that politicians, the media, and the population engage with the issue, and a more or less factual discussion takes place. This is the core of political culture in Switzerland.

In the debates around Swiss neutrality, historical examples are particularly important in highlighting its role and significance. These examples show how vital permanent neutrality was for Switzerland, Europe, and the world, and why it must now be more firmly anchored in the consti-

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tution through the initiative. In this context, the "Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe" (CSCE) is of particular importance. The signing of the CSCE Final Act was celebrated on 1 August 2025, marking its 50th anniversary. This process exemplifies the great value of Swiss neutrality.

Background of the CSCE

The initiative to convene a European security conference was launched in 1969 by the Soviet Union and the states of the *Warsaw Pact*. The policy of détente between East and West had already taken shape: there was a direct communication channel between Moscow and Washington, and disarmament negotiations were also taking place. East and West sought to improve the situation on the European continent and considered creating a "security architecture" for Europe. The *European Community* (EC, now the EU), NATO, the neutral and non-aligned states, as well as the Eastern bloc, had differing demands in this regard. This did not prevent states from beginning mutual consultations. Switzerland was also actively involved.

In 1970, a working group of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs produced a report outlining the direction of Swiss interests. Building on its traditional role as an arbiter in interstate conflicts, Swiss diplomacy proposed the establishment of a system for the peaceful settlement of disputes. The focus was to be the "promotion of human relations between East and West." The report also called for "the right to neutrality to be enshrined within the framework of the conference." In addition, as part of its "Good Offices," Switzerland offered Geneva as a possible venue for the negotiations.

Two years of mutual soundings and discussions then followed across Europe. Switzerland exchanged most intensively with the other neutrals, but it also found the exchange with Eastern European countries surprisingly fruitful. The main negotiations then took place from September 1973 in Geneva, as Switzerland had suggested. Thirty-five states participated: the seven Warsaw Pact states, the fifteen NATO states, and thirteen neutral countries. The neutral or non-aligned countries were Switzerland, Austria, Sweden, Finland, Yugoslavia, Cyprus, Malta, San Marino, Liechtenstein, Ireland, Iceland, Monaco, and the Holy See.

Four thematic areas—so-called "baskets"—were defined. The first basket concerned a catalogue of principles on fundamental questions of sovereignty and interstate relations, security policy considerations in the narrower sense, and confidence-building measures in the military field. The second basket was devoted to cooperation between East and West in the fields of economy, science, technology, and environment. The third basket, as proposed by Switzerland, addressed "human contacts" between East and West. Finally, the fourth basket dealt with setting the further working process of the CSCE.

The Role of Switzerland

It should be noted that neutral Switzerland, with its quiet behind-the-scenes diplomacy, continuously played a significant role. Together with the other neutrals—Austria, Sweden, and Finland—it provided important mediation services, thereby strengthening the entire process. From 1974, it also did so in association with non-aligned Yugoslavia and the small states of Cyprus, Malta, San Marino, and Liechtenstein as the "Group of N+N," the "Neutrals and Non-Aligned."

There was no fundamental willingness to compromise on the part of the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the USA. Thus, the Swiss delegation leader *Rudolf Bindschedler* speaks in his final report on the CSCE process of the "rigidity of the great powers". He repeatedly mentions in his report the "double game", meaning the discrepancy between the public statements of governments, especially the great powers, and the positions of their delegations in Geneva. Whenever discussions reached such an impasse that neither side could make or accept concessions without losing face, proposals were introduced through the channel of the neutrals. In such key moments, Swiss diplomats helped to unblock the negotiations and ultimately achieve results acceptable to all states. Temporarily, therefore, a willingness to compromise between the superpowers could always be reached.

In his final report, Bindschedler goes into great detail about the role of the neutrals throughout the process and considers their influence to be very high: "The extent of the common interests [i.e., of the neutrals and non-aligned] turned out to be much greater than initially assumed. Cooperation in this group was close and based on trust. Their unified stance forced the

blocs to show consideration and facilitated the implementation of numerous demands. […] For the neutrals and non-aligned, their mutual relationship of trust is probably one of the most important results of the conference."

The Final Act in Helsinki

After two years of negotiations, which took place in Geneva from 18 September 1973 to 21 July 1975, the delegates of 35 states signed the CSCE Final Act in Helsinki on 1 August 1975. The document is divided into four sections. The first section deals with "Questions of Security in Europe", structured into a declaration of ten guiding principles:

1. Sovereign equality, respect for the rights inherent in sovereignty
2. Refraining from the threat or use of force
3. Inviolability of borders
4. Territorial integrity of states
5. Peaceful settlement of disputes
6. Non-intervention in internal affairs
7. Respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, including freedom of thought, conscience, religion, and belief
8. Equal rights and self-determination of peoples
9. Cooperation among states
10. Fulfilment in good faith of obligations under international law

Bindschedler's assessments of the ten guiding principles are very revealing: "The Final Act contains numerous rules of conduct for the future that must be judged positively." Above all, he considered the ten guiding principles: "Although the ten principles on interstate relations largely repeat existing international law, as found especially in the UN Charter, the catalogue of principles develops and supplements important norms." He went on: "Principle I explicitly emphasises the right of states to join or not join international organisations, to be or not be a member of an alliance, as well as the right to neutrality." Thus, an important demand of Switzerland had been incorporated into the final document.

In light of the at times difficult experiences of the following decades, the member states of the OSCE decided at their conference in Istanbul in November 1999 to clarify this right. In their European Security Charter, they agreed in point 8 that "Every participating State has the same right to security. We reaffirm the inherent right of each participating State to freely choose its security arrangements, including alliance treaties, or to change them in the course of their development. Every State also has the right to neutrality. Each participating State will respect the rights of all others in this regard. They will not consolidate their security at the expense of the security of other States."

Imagine the current situation if the bloc-aligned countries had exercised this right and mutual obligation!

The second section of the Final Act deals with cooperation in the fields of economy, science, technology, and environment; the third section addresses issues of security and cooperation in the Mediterranean; and the fourth section sets out principles of cooperation in humanitarian and cultural fields. Particularly in this area, Bindschedler emphasised in his final report the importance of the neutrals:

"The results […] in the field of human contacts, travel, family reunification, and information are largely attributable to the activities of the neutrals." Here, "political-psychological considerations" played a major role. This example clearly shows the political and moral superiority of the neutral position. Yet Bindschedler also recognised the deficits of the Final Act. It was not a treaty under international law: "This is regrettable, for only on the basis of law does a lasting and stable settlement appear possible. […] Thus, the Final Act is only a political declaration, a statement of intent. As such, it can have psychological and political effects. Its value, however, can only be assessed in the future."

Bindschedler specifically highlighted Principle 10, "the fulfilment in good faith of obligations under international law". These are essentially central principles of peace ethics in politics and, according to Bindschedler, "rules of conduct for the future that must be judged positively". This important provision, too, came about under the decisive leadership of the neutrals.

Summarising, Bindschedler remarked: "However, the conference can serve as a starting point for further political development and contribute to an improvement in the climate among states and to the reduction of existing tensions."

And specifically for the neutral countries: "The conference and the Final Act strengthened the position of small states and neutrals. They have become a factor that must be reckoned with—not militarily, but politically. For the future, the

task is to maintain this position." This position, according to Bindschedler, should be used particularly for "peaceful dispute settlement". He ultimately described the role of neutral Switzerland as a diplomatic great power:

"In general, the conference enhanced the weight, role, and importance of Switzerland. On numerous individual points, Swiss proposals were adopted. […] Together with the other neutrals, Switzerland acted as mediator and contributed significantly to achieving solutions satisfactory to all." These efforts, Bindschedler said, must continue: "The most harmful thing would be inactivity; here too the rule applies that we must indeed be pessimists of knowledge, but optimists of action."

For Switzerland, Federal President *Pierre Graber* signed the *Final Act of the CSCE* on 1 August 1975. In his address to the assembled delegates, Graber referred to the special commitment of neutral Switzerland to the success of the conference: "Switzerland, located at the crossroads of three cultural spheres that have greatly contributed to the worldwide influence of the old continent, has always shared in Europe's life. Throughout its seven-hundred-year history, it has shared its highs and its tribulations. As I said two years ago, here in the same place, my country's neutrality has never been an alibi for a policy of the 'empty chair', for indifference and withdrawal into itself. On the contrary, it has awakened in it the need for solidarity and the will to serve the international community at any time and to the extent of its means."

He continued in his forceful speech: "The good understanding of all of Europe is and remains our constant wish. The fact that we have joined no alliances or coalitions thus corresponds deeply to a vocation that is European in the broadest sense. That is why we are pleased that the option of neutrality has been included in the chapter of principles that are to apply in relations between states. Neutrality has thus been recognised as a specific instrument of European security and cooperation."

Graber explicitly addressed Europe's responsibility to look beyond the continent and support developing countries. He wanted to build the security architecture beyond Europe—let us only think of the Vietnam War, which ended in the same year, 1975, as the signing of the CSCE Final Act, with its consequences for Southeast Asia.

Thanks to its diplomatic skills as a neutral state, the Swiss delegation led by Federal Councillor Pierre Graber (2nd from right) was able to exert considerable influence on the conclusion of the CSCE Treaty. (Picture Keystone)

Graber also emphasised the psychological dimension of human relations. The task, he said, was "on the one hand to create more complete, secure structures in intra-European relations and on the other to develop and harmonise human relations within each of our countries and across borders." The documents, Graber said, provided a first reference point for this: "The provisions we solemnly adopt here must […] be implemented tomorrow. […] It requires unceasing goodwill from all participating states, and the greatest efforts will still be needed to achieve this goal. […] Ultimately, these texts will only be worth as much as their application."

The signing of the Final Act by 35 heads of state and government was a strong sign of détente—and above all thanks to neutral Switzerland. The Act is an extraordinary document. It is by no means a matter of course that, in the middle of the Cold War, the representatives of all European states from West and East, including the Soviet Union as well as the USA and Canada, came together at one table, agreed on common values, and committed themselves to observing the same rules. Europe was to become safer, and human contacts between East and West were to be expanded. But détente unfortunately soon faltered.

Conclusion and Outlook

At follow-up conferences, the implementation of the CSCE Final Act in individual states was to be examined. The CSCE remained in existence until the end of the Cold War as a forum for East-West dialogue and contributed greatly, perhaps even decisively, to overcoming the Cold War. On the one hand, the continuity of the CSCE process contributed to this development; on the other,

the USA and the Soviet Union increasingly disregarded the fundamental principles of the Helsinki Final Act.

In the USA, the Reagan years in the 1980s intensified mutual distrust and fuelled discord through accusations and deception. *Ronald Reagan* was advised by *neocons* and, together with British Prime Minister *Margaret Thatcher,* pursued a neoliberal policy that fuelled globalisation. With the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the other superpower once again opted for confrontation and war, thereby worsening the East-West conflict. The important principle of the CSCE Final Act, namely the "fulfilment in good faith of obligations under international law", was broken, and much trust was lost.

The end of the Cold War was celebrated in 1990 at a CSCE summit in Paris. But the "Charter of Paris", with its title "A New Era of Democracy, Peace, and Unity", could not disguise the new rifts. The USA, as the only world power, even spoke of an "end of history". As we know today, that was a blatant lie. Already in 1991, the USA staged the First Gulf War, and since then it has been permanently at war. As already mentioned, it was then, with the adoption of economic sanctions by the Swiss Federal Council, that the process of dissolving Swiss neutrality began.

Although the global political situation was precarious, the CSCE summit meeting in Budapest on 5 and 6 December 1994, decided to transform the CSCE into an organisation. From 1 January 1995, it was continued as the *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE), and thus to this day remains a permanent conference with headquarters in Vienna. With the destruction of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, however, the already weakened OSCE began its decline. Today it no longer has any significance.

Next year, Switzerland will assume the chairmanship of the OSCE (as it did in 1996 and 2014). With its 57 participating states and permanent institutions such as the Ministerial Council and the Parliamentary Assembly, the OSCE is still the world's largest regional organisation for cooperative security. It spans the northern hemisphere and, through cooperation for example with BRICS and other organisations of the Global South, could once again strengthen its weight. These organisations could serve as models for interstate coexistence in a multipolar world. Switzerland would therefore have a very important task next year as chair of the OSCE and the opportunity to strengthen the OSCE again in the spirit of the CSCE Final Act. It should urgently demand renewed mutual respect among states, renunciation of violence, conflict resolution exclusively by diplomatic means, renunciation of border changes, and cooperation for the benefit of all.

That is why the initiative, also likely to come to a vote next year, which seeks to enshrine neutrality more clearly in the Swiss constitution, is so important. Not only for Switzerland, but also for Europe and the world. This could also strengthen the OSCE, mindful of the importance that the neutrals had for the CSCE process. With a view to the world situation, as Bindschedler said, one may well be a pessimist of knowledge, but one can also be an optimist of action. In this sense, the Swiss population must be encouraged to support the neutrality initiative. A great deal of work still lies ahead of us.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")