

What kind of neutrality for Switzerland?

2026 Summer Conference of “Swiss Standpoint”

by the editorial team

At the 2026 summer conference of “Swiss Standpoint”, entitled “What Kind of Neutrality for Switzerland?”, six experts took part in four panel discussions in Frauenfeld from 24 to 26 July, sharing their views and insights on Swiss neutrality and the upcoming referendum on 27 September 2026 with an engaged audience.



René Roca. (Picture sv)

In the packed rooms, Dr René Roca, co-initiator of the “Neutrality Initiative”, explained the text of the initiative. The historian and founder of the “Research Institute for Direct Democracy” (FIDD) then traced the historical background to Swiss neutrality.

In his presentation, René Roca examined two aspects in greater detail: *Internal neutrality*. As the Swiss Confederation grew, a culture developed of resolving conflicts amongst its members with the help of third parties. References to this can already be found in the *Federal Charter of 1291*. This meant that no factions were formed amongst the Confederates; instead, attempts at mediation were made by those not involved in the conflict. “Stille sitzen” – that is, not taking sides, but seeking solutions to the conflict and acting as mediators. In other words, a form of neutrality within the Swiss Confederation.

This approach helps to better understand *external neutrality*. In terms of foreign policy, the Swiss Confederates only turned away from their expansionist policy following their defeat in the battle of Marignano in 1515.

Switzerland has been recognised as a sovereign state since the *Peace of Westphalia* in 1648. In 1674, the term “neutrality” appeared for the first time in the minutes of the Swiss Diet. From then on, Switzerland no longer pursued a policy of power politics; it remained neutral.

In 1815, at Switzerland’s own request, the then great powers – England, Russia, France and Austria – officially recognised Switzerland as a neutral state at the *Congress of Vienna*. Central to Switzerland’s strategy was the task of permanently (in perpetuity) defending its territory, particularly the Alpine passes, against external threats (by military means) and of not allying itself with any belligerent party. This made sense in terms of power politics and was a stroke of luck for Switzerland, given that the Swiss population had been severely affected by the Napoleonic Wars and the military occupation by France.

Under international law, the rights and obligations of neutral states were first regulated internationally by the *Hague Convention on Land Warfare* of 1899/1907.

Closely linked to the country’s policy of neutrality is its humanitarian commitment, which first came to the fore during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 through the Red Cross, founded by *Henri Dunant*. Only a credibly neutral state can provide effective aid across the borders of the warring parties (including the rescue of the civilian population of Strasbourg and the passage through Switzerland of the Bourbaki Army).

The numerous humanitarian operations that Switzerland organised and facilitated internationally during the First and Second World Wars, as well as in the years that followed, were immense. Key aspects of this include: acting as a protecting power, providing good offices, serving as the depositary state for the *International Committee of the Red Cross*, and hosting countless international UN organisations. Central to this is, and remains, the credibility of its neutrality.

For Dr Roca, the current requirement is for Switzerland’s Federal Council to uphold this credibility. At the same time, he notes that the creeping failure of successive governments over the past decades is one of the reasons why the country has today lost a great deal of trust and credibility on the international stage. This is where the Neutrality Initiative comes in.



Pascal Lottaz. (Screenshot from the video message)

Dr Roca's presentation was immediately followed by a ten-minute video statement from Associate Professor Dr *Pascal Lottaz* in Kyoto. He is conducting research there on neutrality in international relations. Dr Lottaz countered the accusation that neutrality is immoral with a counter-argument: neutrality prevents war. Every state that is neutral expands the war-free zones and, in doing so, increases the influence of peaceful states.

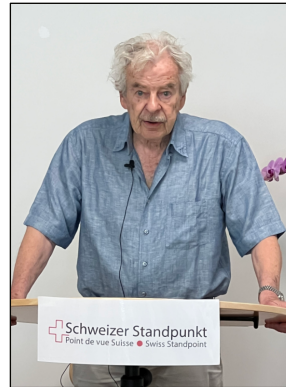
The logic of neutrality, which is geared towards remaining a sovereign state and defending one's own territory, has a de-escalating effect. According to Lottaz, Switzerland's integral, perpetual and armed neutrality is a form of "realist pacifism".

He cited Ukraine as a current example: as a neutral state, it could have remained a buffer between Russia and NATO. Anyone who believes they are fighting on the side of the "good guys" against the "bad guys" is escalating the conflict rather than resolving it or at least de-escalating it.

As a member of the international section of the Social Democratic Party, Pascal Lottaz also criticised Switzerland's rapprochement with NATO. NATO has been actively waging war for decades. He recalled the military operations in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the lively discussion that followed, various aspects of neutrality were addressed. Particular emphasis was placed on Switzerland's humanitarian role as a neutral, medium-sized state on the world stage. In particular, the Federal Council's disastrous decision in 2022 to align itself with the European Union and its sanctions packages against Russia dealt a severe blow to Swiss neutrality. In the context of this weak stance by the government, the discussion raised the question of Switzerland's remaining sovereignty. This is where the Neutrality Initiative takes on great significance. The adoption of the proposed constitutional article would strengthen the Federal Council's ability to return to a sovereign policy of neutrality.

On Saturday morning, political scientist Prof. em. Dr *Wolf Linder* explained the issue of "sanctions"



Wolf Linder. (Picture mt)

tions" or "unilateral coercive measures" imposed by states or groups of states against other states or individuals, thereby drawing a direct link to Swiss neutrality.

Linder approached the issue of "sanctions" in general terms. Who is entitled to impose sanc-

tions? Why are sanctions permitted? What effect do sanctions have?

Sanctions are generally understood to be unilateral measures taken against a state that violates international law. For example, the UN imposes sanctions for breaches of the prohibition on the use of force between states or of human rights.

Linder, however, quickly made it clear that sanctions policy often does not follow the law, but rather the political interests of the powerful, or, more precisely, the law of the strongest.

Linder illustrated this with a series of examples. Not every state that breaches international law or human rights is sanctioned. For instance, Russia was sanctioned by the EU for its attack on Ukraine, yet the EU did not intervene against Ukraine's policies towards the Russian-speaking minority (2014 to 2022).

Iran has long been subject to sanctions due to human rights violations by its regime. However, the military incursions by the US and Israel into Iran in March and July of this year did not trigger any sanctions.

The US constitutes a special case. Since the 19th century, it has assumed the "right" to intervene in any country in South America if its policies run counter to US interests. Thus, Cuba has been economically starved by the US for 64 years, and the US also attempts to punish all other states if they defy the sanctions against Cuba. The UN General Assembly regularly calls, by a large majority, for the lifting of these coercive measures, which contravene international law. To no avail, however, as such demands are vetoed by the US in the Security Council.

Finally, the EU's sanctions policy appears to know no bounds. The Council of the European Union can adopt measures in the name of "democracy and peace" and against "developments that run counter to the EU's objectives

and values” – in practice, against anything the Council does not approve of. Professor Linder considers the sanctions policy against individuals and organisations to be arbitrary.

Well known in Switzerland is the case of former Swiss Army colonel, strategic analyst and author *Jacques Baud*, who lives in Brussels. Overnight, he was banned from leaving the country and his access to his bank account was blocked on the grounds of alleged, but unsubstantiated, dissemination of Russian propaganda. Baud was stripped of his rights from one day to the next, without a hearing and in violation of all due process. Baud is not the only one. The Council of the EU has sanctioned around 5,000 individuals and organisations, and anyone who supports them is also liable to prosecution.

Despite all this, the intended impact of sanctions is minimal. They very rarely achieve the goal of improving a regime or even bringing about regime change; instead, they prolong conflicts, whilst often having a devastating effect on the civilian population. According to academic reports and journals (*The Lancet*), 500,000 people worldwide die each year as a result of sanctions – more than the number of war casualties!

Sanctions are therefore not an instrument of peace; on the contrary, they reflect the logic of hostility and war.

Professor Linder’s analysis was sobering: in international sanctions policy, might makes right. Therefore: only adopt UN sanctions. These are the only ones to which Switzerland is legally bound, and the only ones supported by the entire international community.



Gabriel Galice.
(Picture mt)

Dr *Gabriel Galice*, Director of the *Geneva International Peace Institute* (GIPRI), reported on his own positive experiences with neutrality.

In the first part, he provided an insight into the theory of philosophical and diplomatic recognition in the context of neutrality (*Axel Honneth* in Germany, *Paul Ricoeur* in France). He also explained the concepts of “sanctions” and “protecting power”. As of February 2026, Switzerland holds eight protectorate mandates across various continents. The most important

foundation for a state’s role as a protectorate is neutrality, as this guarantees the necessary *credibility*, *impartiality* and *acceptance* amongst all parties to a conflict.

In the second part, Gabriel Galice presented an example of Switzerland’s constructive engagement as a neutral state.

This focused on demonstrating Switzerland’s diplomatic foresight as a protecting power.

Discretion and adherence to the rules (laws, customs) are the very opposite of the widespread violations of the law, acts of betrayal and breaches of trust seen today, which include, amongst other things, launching military attacks against the opposing party whilst negotiations are ongoing.

In the summer of 2006, Gabriel Galice, as a peace researcher and director of GIPRI, was approached by the then Swiss Ambassador to Tehran, *Philippe Welti*, who asked whether he would be prepared to organise a meeting in Geneva – at that time the best venue for peace talks.

The aim was to hold a discreet conference to which Iranian, US and other academics were to be invited to discuss a topic yet to be determined. The only condition was that two specific Iranians and two specific Americans should be included in the panel discussion. He was free to decide for himself who else to invite. The conference was funded by the Swiss Government. The title of the conference was chosen so that the nuclear issue could be discussed without mentioning it by name.

The conference went ahead and proceeded without incident. However, Gabriel Galice only learnt of the meeting’s true purpose afterwards – from the ambassador’s Swiss military attaché. The aim at the time was to prevent a US attack on Iran – on the grounds that one must not attack the other party whilst negotiations are ongoing ...



Ralph Bosshard.
(Picture mt)

Ralph Bosshard, retired Lieutenant Colonel (General Staff) and former Swiss Special Adviser to the OSCE in Vienna, provided an overview of the military threat situation facing Switzerland. He was able to credibly and factually refute any suggestion of a potential threat to Switzerland

from the Russian army. Based on the figures (armies, economic output, GDP, size, etc.), it very quickly became clear to the audience that the Russian army would be neither capable nor willing to launch a military attack on or occupy parts of Europe. Against the backdrop of this comparison, the threat scenario constructed by the Federal Council, and in particular the DDPS, appeared completely implausible.

On the subject of missile and drone threats, Ralph Bosshard explained that an effective defence is only complete with systematic satellite surveillance covering the whole of Russia – and even the US itself probably does not possess such capabilities. The *SkyShield* project, which the then Head of the DDPS, *Viola Amherd*, had initiated in collaboration with several NATO states, costs a great deal of money and remains inefficient, according to Bosshard.

With a suitable army, Switzerland is perfectly capable of defending itself effectively and pursuing a credible policy of neutrality. Drawing on various factors such as troop strength, rapid deployment capabilities and the state of training, the military expert made it clear that this possibility still exists but requires a change in mindset. Only then would it also be possible to credibly deploy Switzerland's own "soft power" as a neutral state once again.



Rene Zittlau.
(Picture mt)

The German geopolitical analyst *Rene Zittlau* outlined a sobering trend concerning Switzerland's immediate neighbour, the European Union. The starting point for his analysis was the development of the German federal budget for 2028–2030.

Defence spending is skyrocketing and will soon account for over 40 per cent of the total national budget. The trend is upwards. By way of comparison, Zittlau highlighted the rise in the military budget during the Hitler regime. Alarming, parallels could not be dismissed.

At the same time, the speaker referred to the militarisation of the entire European Union, accompanied by the political disempowerment of the member states. This is an alarming develop-

ment. The EU's foreign policy finds expression in the so-called association agreements, which are extremely aggressive and expansionist. The entire strategy functions by promoting the image of Russia as the enemy.

Zittlau traced the European Union's development into a "superstate" – the so-called "EU integration" – from the harmonisation of the economy, currency and the law through to military rearmament, using the milestones of the *Maastricht Treaty* and the *Treaty of Lisbon* as examples. The EU now compels its member states to fulfil a duty of mutual assistance, regulated more strictly than under NATO (Article 5). With their increased armament, the EU states are creating a pull in the economic sphere that is also affecting Switzerland.

In the ensuing discussion, it was pointed out that the European Union has now become a giant with feet of clay. The medium-sized and smaller states would, the longer this went on, be less and less willing to put up with being patronised by Brussels. On the other hand, attention was drawn to Switzerland's strategic importance for the European Union and the EU's interest in binding Switzerland more closely to itself. For Zittlau, the pressure exerted by the European Union on Switzerland appeared to be far more threatening than any other scenario.

An in-depth discussion took place at a closing event under the heading "Review and Outlook" with the political scientist *Wolf Linder*, the geopolitical analyst *René Zittlau* and the military expert *Ralph Bosshard*.

Regaining credible neutrality was the top priority for both the speakers and the participants. Ralph Bosshard characterised the past decades as an attempt by "foreign powers" to take control of Switzerland.

Several participants emphasised the importance of providing the public with accurate information as a key building block for the country's neutrality. There has been a fundamental erosion of basic knowledge of constitutional law, which is also reflected in uninformed remarks by politicians.

Today, it is hardly possible to assume that fundamental concepts such as neutrality or direct democracy are understood in their proper context. This presents a major challenge, even after the referendum. The role of the media has

changed: instead of reflecting opinions and encouraging debate, information is now presented in a one-sided manner. However, the social media movement is bringing new dynamics to this arena.

The open discussions, the diversity of arguments, the wealth of information and the excel-

lent organisation of the entire event were highlighted by several participants, both in the room and on Zoom.

Some attendees remarked that such events should be given more space in the public media landscape.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")