

Change of heart in Bern?

The Federal Council welcomes the US government's peace efforts in Ukraine. Is this the start of a U-turn in Swiss foreign policy?

by Michael Straumann*



Michael Straumann.
(Picture ma)

US Vice President J.D. Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference caused a stir. He *sharply criticised politicians in EU countries for*¹ no longer respecting the democratic will of their own people and restricting freedom of expression. Vance received widespread support for this

in social media. By contrast, the politicians of the old parties in Europe, especially in Germany, were not impressed. Bavarian Prime Minister *Markus Söder* responded to Vance's criticism with a *mocking grin*.² Defence Minister *Boris Pistorius* described the vice-president's remarks as "*not acceptable*".³ CDU leader and chancellor candidate *Friedrich Merz* found them "*offensive*".⁴ So European politicians across the board reacted with outrage.

Not so the Swiss Federal Council: President *Karin Keller-Sutter* *praised the speech*.⁵ It had been a "plea for direct democracy", she explained in a newspaper interview. She shared the values Vance addressed, "such as freedom and the opportunity for the people to express their opinions". This, in turn, met with criticism in the Swiss parliament. *Cédric Wermuth*, a Social Democrat member of the National Council, reacted with a hysteria similar to the German old-party politicians and *described Keller-Sutter's praise*⁶ as "chumming up to neo-fascist politics".

The new tone of Switzerland's federal government towards the new US administration is striking. In addition to the words of praise from the Swiss president, the Federal Council welcomes the *Trump* administration's current efforts to come to the negotiating table with Russia and finally end the war in Ukraine. The Swiss *Sonntags-*

zeitung *headlined*:⁷ "Federal Council changes course in foreign policy".

Model student in total economic war

Eight months ago, the situation looked completely different. That summer, Switzerland hosted the "peace conference" in the mountain resort Bürgenstock. Since Russia, as a warring party, *was not even invited*,⁸ this summit turned out to be a farce from the outset. Rather, it was a benefit event for the *Zelensky* government to *enable the further delivery of weapons to Ukraine*.⁹ In any case, it did not help peace. Soldiers on both sides of the front continue to die to this day – and will continue to do so.

In addition to its one-sided expressions of solidarity with Kiev, the Swiss government has distinguished itself in the last three years as the class leader in implementing sanctions against Russia. What many do not know: among the countries that have imposed the most sanctions against Russia, *Switzerland, with 3,010 measures, ranks third*,¹⁰ ahead of the EU, which has only adopted 2,234 measures. The USA and Canada are ranked first and second with 6,433 and 3,185 measures respectively. In short, the Federal Council missed no opportunity in its efforts to damage Switzerland's reputation as a neutral state. It willingly went along with this – in the deceptive assumption that it could bring a nuclear power to its knees without risking a nuclear inferno.

Renunciation of Brussels

Now, all of a sudden, it is welcomed that Russia is being brought back to the negotiating table. Negotiations are taking place in Saudi Arabia – which should also give Switzerland food for thought. Have we really reached the point where Switzerland has to learn from Saudi Arabia what neutrality means? No wonder Russia *considers it a hostile state*.¹¹ The Federal Council's positive tone towards the US peace offensive in Ukraine shows that it may have recognised the sign of the times: *a new sheriff is in town in Washing-*

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ton.¹² However, one swallow does not make a summer. It remains to be seen how the Federal Council will position itself in terms of foreign policy in the near and medium term.

In my article *"Make Switzerland neutral again!"*,¹³ I have already pointed out that *Donald Trump's* second term in office would be a good window of opportunity for Switzerland to withdraw from the Russia sanctions. This would be the basic prerequisite for rehabilitating itself as a neutral state – although it will take years to rebuild trust with Russia and other states with which it has caused a lot of diplomatic trouble in the past.

During the first four years of the Trump presidency, Switzerland maintained constructive relations with the United States. As a result, the Federal Council will be dealing with a US government that tends to be well disposed towards Switzerland. At the same time, however, relations between Brussels and Washington are already cooling off, as the *Munich Security Conference* showed. To avoid being caught in the US crossfire, Switzerland would once again be well advised to emancipate itself from the European Union, not to implement EU censorship laws such as the *Digital Services Act*¹⁴ in its own country and to put the planned framework agreement with Brussels on hold.

Source: <https://www.straumedien.ch/p/sinneswandel-in-bundesbern>, 18 February 2025

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

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¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCOsgfINdKg>

² https://x.com/Deu_Kurier/status/1890448254069788731

³ <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/j-d-vance-in-muenchen-boris-pistorius-nennt-aeusserungen-nicht-akzeptabel-ada7bdd7-2700-43bb-89fa-f39d01603ab3>

⁴ <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/CDU-Chef-Friedrich-Merz-kritisiert-J-D-Vance-fuer-fast-schon-uebergriffige-Rede-article25564831.html>

⁵ <https://epaper.sonntagszeitung.ch/article/10000/10000/2025-02-16/1/135127798>

⁶ <https://www.nau.ch/politik/bundeshaus/karin-keller-sutter-erntet-wegen-vance-lob-kritik-fdp-relativiert-66915077>

⁷ <https://epaper.sonntagszeitung.ch/article/10000/10000/2025-02-16/1/135127798>

⁸ <https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/interview-mit-viola-amherd-warum-hat-man-russland-nicht-eingeladen-frau-bundespraesidentin>

⁹ <https://schweizermonat.ch/der-friedensgipfel-droht-zur-ruestungskonferenz-zu-werden/>

¹⁰ <https://www.castellum.ai/russia-sanctions-dashboard>

¹¹ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/russischer-aussenminister-bezeichnet-schweiz-als-%22offen-feindselig%22/76037916>

¹² <https://reitschuster.de/post/ein-neuer-sheriff-ist-in-der-stadt/>

¹³ <https://www.straumedien.ch/p/make-switzerland-neutral-again>

¹⁴ <https://www.inside-it.ch/bundesrat-will-social-media-plattformen-regulieren-20240815>