

Neutrality on demand?

How the federal government in Bern is gradually leading Switzerland away from its historical role

by Daniel Funk*



Daniel Funk. (Picture ma)

Officially, Switzerland is neutral. In practice, however, this principle has been eroded for years – deliberately, strategically and against the will of the people, as internal statements and decisions show.

Swiss neutrality is considered a hallmark of the country – enshrined in international law, historically proven and internationally recognised. But anyone who takes a sober look at the security and foreign policy course of recent years will see a different picture: forces not inclined towards neutrality have established themselves in Bern and are gradually undermining it.

This is rarely spoken about openly. But the logic behind it is well documented.¹ At the turn of the millennium, the then top civil servant and military strategist, Ambassador Anton Thalmann, formulated a position that seems more relevant today than ever. His statement has been passed down and is telling:

“Neutrality, that is no longer needed, must be gently allowed to fade away.”

This was no slip of the tongue, but part of a plan. Thalmann was project manager of the Security Policy Report 2000 and later one of the architects of Switzerland's security policy rapprochement with NATO. At a NATO symposium, he spoke openly about how this departure from traditional neutrality was politically sensitive – and therefore had to be prepared for:

“Without thorough psychological preparation, public opinion will not go along with it.”

It is precisely this strategy that continues to shape politics today. Instead of openly present-



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ing the question of neutrality to the people, it has been watered down bit by bit: accession to the *Partnership for Peace*, increasing military cooperation with NATO countries, participation in EU military projects such as PESCO, and most recently even parliamentary motions to examine a formalised security policy link with NATO.

Officially, it is always said that neutrality will be maintained. In fact, it is being reinterpreted – more flexible, more political, more partisan. This has become particularly clear since the war in Ukraine. The Federal Council adopted sanctions outside a UN mandate and took a clear political stance. This was noted internationally. Even former allies of the *Good offices* no longer consider Switzerland to be credibly neutral.

Parliamentary reports increasingly portray neutrality as an obstacle – something that restricts the scope for action in foreign and security policy. This is precisely the core of the conflict: neutrality is not a tactical instrument that can be adjusted according to the geopolitical climate. It is a principle of order – or it is nothing.

The direct counterproposal to the *neutrality initiative* exemplifies this tension. Although neutrality is clarified in linguistic terms, key protective clauses are being removed: the ban on joining military alliances and the renunciation of non-military coercive measures outside the UN. What remains is neutrality without bite – a nice-sounding principle without binding guidelines.

* Daniel Funk is a member of the board of the Movement for neutrality *bene.swiss*.

The consequences of this development are predictable. Switzerland is gradually losing what made it unique: trust beyond the power blocs. Former diplomats point out that the *Good offices* – once a quiet but effective instrument of Swiss foreign policy – are hardly in demand anymore. Those who take sides are no longer mediators.

The real controversy is not that neutrality is being debated, but how it is being debated: technocratically, tactically, often bypassing the people. The decisive course is to be set without ever clearly stating what is at stake: nothing less than the abandonment of a central pillar of Swiss identity. Or, to quote one of the strategists

of the time: not by decision, but by allowing it to fade away.

Nevertheless, the Swiss people have a choice. Thanks to the initiators of the *neutrality initiative*.² If it is accepted end of 2026 or in early 2027, neutrality in its traditional form will be enshrined in the Federal Constitution. The hurdle to change and water it down again is high.

Source: <https://transition-news.org/neutralitat-auf-abruf-wie-bundesbern-die-schweiz-schleichend-aus-ihrer>, January 2026

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://bene.swiss/bewegung-fuer-neutralitaet-fordert-neutralitaetsinitiative-zur-annahme-zu-empfehlen/>

² <https://neutralitaet-ja.ch>