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Bern Governs Against the Will of the People It Claims to Serve

The Federal Department of Defence (DDPS) has been bringing Switzerland closer to NATO for years, without ever consulting the people. On 27 September, the Swiss will finally be able to decide.

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In 1813, a young Greek diplomat in the service of Tsar Alexander I arrived in a Switzerland on the brink of civil war. Born in Corfu, Ioannis Kapodistrias devoted two years to preserving the unity of the Confederation. He then accomplished a far more enduring feat: at the Congress of Vienna, he persuaded the European powers that their common interest required a perpetually neutral Switzerland. On 20 November 1815, in Paris, Austria, France, Great Britain, Portugal, Prussia and

Russia signed a declaration guaranteeing this principle. The Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) still devotes a page to it today, acknowledging that, without it, Switzerland would look very different indeed.

This guarantee has survived two world wars and the Cold War. It is now being dismantled, not by a vote, but by a government department.

On 27 September 2026, the Swiss people will vote on whether to enshrine perpetual and armed neutrality in the Constitution. The initiative would prohibit Switzerland from entering into any military alliances and would limit its cooperation with existing alliances. It would keep the country out of wars between third countries and would only authorise sanctions when they are approved by the UN. In 2027 or 2028, voters will decide on a VAT increase intended to fund a massive rearmament programme. The two issues appear to be separate. In reality, they are one and the same. Should the Swiss entrust their money and their neutrality to the DDPS?

The answer is no, in both cases.

Four scandals, zero consequences

Let's start with RUAG, the Confederation's armaments and maintenance company. It perfectly epitomises a state-owned enterprise that has slipped beyond the control of the ministry that owns it.

In August 2019, a whistleblower alerted the DDPS and RUAG's board of directors regarding the sale of Leopard tanks. Tanks and spare parts were allegedly sold well below their market value. No one investigated these allegations. Six years later, in February 2025, the Swiss Federal Audit Office published its findings. It describes suspicions of fraud, chaotic stock management and a board of directors that overestimated its own supervisory capacity. It identifies serious indications of criminally reprehensible behaviour and estimates the loss at tens of millions of francs. Parliament's Control Committee would later describe the department's handling of the alert as "sub-optimal".

The same audits reveal that in 2016, RUAG purchased 100 second-hand Leopard 1 tanks from the Italian army — without complying with its own authorisation rules, without documented approval from the board and without informing its owner. The tanks remained in storage in Italy, out of sight of Bern. The audits also revealed something even more fundamental: between 2014 and 2023, RUAG carried out 1,140 write-offs and 1,319 inventory adjustments without the army's consent. No physical inventory had ever been carried out. The Left called for a parliamentary committee of inquiry, a measure last used against this department during the 'fiches' affair in 1989. The centre-right majority refused.

Added to this is the 'ransom' affair. In the autumn of 2025, the Akira group hacked RUAG's small subsidiary in Virginia (United States). This entity provides support for the Swiss fleets of F-5 and F/A-18 fighter aircraft. Around 24 gigabytes of data were stolen. RUAG paid the criminals, against the advice of the Federal Office for Cyber Security. The DDPS learns of this, like everyone else, in June 2026, when the chairman of the board mentions the payment of a 'small sum' on SRF radio. In August, the DDPS concluded its investigation and clears RUAG. Its reasoning is as follows: a private-law company decides on such matters independently. The ministry, criticised precisely for failing to supervise RUAG, thus concludes that a ransom payment of which it was never informed is none of its business.

The fourth scandal is the most costly in strategic terms. The Thun ammunition factory had been supplying the Swiss army since 1863. In March 2022, two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, RUAG sold it to the Italian firm Beretta, along with its entire small-calibre division; the buyer undertook to keep the site open until 2027. But in October 2024, Beretta warned that Thun was no longer profitable. According to the head of armaments himself, the DDPS's response was to order more ammunition. The government subsequently admitted in writing that the Swiss market was too small to sustain the factory, and ruled out buying it back. Viola Amherd acknowledged that the sale now appeared in a different light, and her successor, Martin Pfister, has since described it as a mistake. An admission after the event does not constitute policy.

Dependence on foreign ammunition in the event of a crisis would be "fatal in terms of security policy", warned Werner Salzmann, an SVP member of the Council of States, in February 2025.

Swiss money, American coffers

RUAG shows what happens when Bern fails to keep an eye on its own company. The US contracts show what happens when it places its trust in a government that cannot keep its word.

In 2020, voters approved the purchase of new fighter jets with 50.1 per cent of the vote, on the promise of expenditure of 'a maximum of 6 billion francs'. Officials insist that the price of the F-35 is legally fixed. This is not true. Under the US Foreign Military Sales system, the buyer receives estimates, never a binding price, and bears the cost of any increases. The additional cost is now estimated at between 650 million and 1.3 billion francs. The Federal Council chose not to exceed the ceiling. In March 2026, it requested an additional 394 million from Parliament and will purchase around thirty aircraft instead of thirty-six. In September, Parliament's Control Committee reached the conclusion that no one in the department had been willing to draw. There has never been a fixed price.

The same scenario played out on Swiss soil. Parliament had approved 120 million francs for the hangars and buildings in Payerne, Emmen and Meiringen, an amount set in 2018, even before the aircraft had been chosen. The Swiss Federal Audit Office now estimates the cost at at least 200 million, with more than 50 million in related projects excluded from the calculation.

And what of the aircraft itself? In April 2024, the head of the F-35 programme in the United States told Congress that only 29 per cent of the US fleet was fully mission-capable. The US Air Force Secretary described this as 'not a good figure'. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates the programme's lifetime cost at over 2,000 billion dollars, and its estimate of operating costs rises with every new calculation.

As for the purchase of Patriots, the situation is even worse. Switzerland has lost control over its own payments in this regard. Washington has announced delivery delays which the Federal Council now estimates at five to seven years. Bern froze its payments in autumn 2025 to exert pressure. In March 2026, SRF revealed that the Americans had simply helped themselves to funds from the Swiss F-35 account, as both programmes draw on the same FMS trust fund. The head of armaments referred only to a sum of a few hundred million, as Washington had asked him not to be more specific. He described the situation as "sehr unbefriedigend" (very unsatisfactory).

The Federal Council now expects the cost of the Patriot system to rise by half, from around 2 to 3 billion francs. This is for a system whose actual interception rate has been disputed since the Gulf War, ever since US Congressional auditors deemed the successes claimed by the Army to be unsupported by data.

"It's frustrating when you impose a payment freeze and the money ends up being channelled through anyway." — Werner Salzmann

A long series of other failures

RUAG and the two US programmes are the most high-profile cases, but they are merely the tip of the iceberg in a longer list of failures documented by the Swiss Federal Audit Office:

- **The Hermes-900 drones.** In 2015, Parliament approved the purchase of six Israeli reconnaissance drones for just under 300 million francs, to be delivered in 2019. Eleven years later, they are still unable to fly autonomously. They fly only during the day, escorted by piloted aircraft, and full operational capability is not expected until 2029.
- **SAP logistics.** A system costing 240 million was purchased specifically to ensure the army could operate in wartime. It has proved to be dependent on foreign cloud services and therefore ceases to function as soon as the network is cut off. Crisis-resilient logistics are now promised for around 2035.
- **SkyView.** The airspace surveillance system has seen its cost double, from 155 to 314 million francs.
- **IT separation.** The project to separate the army's civilian and military systems has cost around 116 million since 2016, with a further 100 million budgeted. The auditors can only assess its chances of success 'with reservations'.

Taken in isolation, each of these cases would appear to be a one-off. Taken together, they paint a picture of an institution incapable of planning, negotiating or monitoring its suppliers.

The bill to date	Amount
F-35, price variance	650 million to 1.3 billion francs
F-35, buildings and ancillary projects	at least 130 million
Patriot, cost increases	up to approximately 1 billion
SkyView, cost overrun	159 million
RUAG, fraud-related losses	amounting to several tens of millions
Total	**up to approximately 2.7 billion francs**

Not to mention the 4.2 billion committed to the department's seven largest IT programmes.

Quotas, DEI and a small circle

Money is only half the problem. The other half of the problem lies with the people appointed, and those who protect them.

The issue of quotas. Under Viola Amherd, the DDPS set itself the target of increasing the proportion of women in the armed forces from around 1.6 per cent – that is, some 2,300 women – to 10 per cent by 2030, and set up a dedicated unit, 'Women in the Armed Forces and Diversity'. Her successor, Martin Pfister, is staying the course. The department refers to 'target figures', not quotas. It amounts to the same thing. A numerical target, once applied to recruitment and promotions, predetermines the outcome before candidates are assessed and relegates qualifications to a secondary consideration. One can argue in favour of this approach. But it must still be called by its proper name. And for the time being, it isn't even working. In October 2025, 20 Minuten noted that the proportion of women had stagnated.

Duca Widmer: the quota in action. A chemical engineer, specialist in environmental remediation and an elected member of the PDC – the minister's party – for sixteen years in the Ticino Grand Council, Monica Duca Widmer had no experience in the defence sector when Viola Amherd had her appointed in 2019 as chair of BGRB, the holding company tasked with restructuring RUAG. In 2023, she joined the board of RUAG MRO. When her name was put forward for the chairmanship in 2024, the Blick summarised the argument in her favour in a single sentence: she is a woman. The argument against her was that she had already been at the helm of RUAG for years without having brought order to the organisation. In 2025, she was one of three directors to whom the Federal Council granted only conditional discharge in the fraud case, and she did not stand for re-election. The same was true of Sibylle Minder Hochreutener, an academic with no links to defence or any political party, whose case shows that, on the RUAG board, sector-specific expertise was simply not required.

Nicolas Perrin chaired RUAG MRO from its inception in 2020, having been appointed on the recommendation of Viola Amherd herself. He is the brother-in-law of Brigitte Hauser-Süess, the minister's long-standing personal aide and close associate. In the summer of 2023, he publicly defended the minister in the Leopard affair, claiming that RUAG had signed the contract on its own and had only informed her afterwards. His departure was announced on 20 February 2024, the very day that the Swiss Federal Audit Office published its initial findings on the tank deals. No reason was given, and he remained in post for a further ten months.

Beyond quotas: the network. Pälvi Pulli, of Finnish origin, rose through the ranks of the DDPS's security policy department in six years. Head of Security Policy in 2018, ambassador in 2019, then Deputy State Secretary in 2024. It was under her leadership that the 2021 Security Policy Report, its 2022 supplement and the 2026 Strategy were drafted – the documents that laid the foundations for closer ties with NATO. Although she was Viola Amherd's favourite to head the new SEPOS, she was ultimately passed over, her profile being deemed 'too internationalist' within the department itself. Too internationalist to lead the secretariat, but not to draft its doctrine. In July 2026, she left the DDPS 'by mutual agreement', with a severance payment equivalent to eight months' salary. A book published this year also makes claims about her private life. It was withdrawn from bookshops following intervention by her lawyer; Pälvi Pulli rejects these claims, and we do not repeat them here.

Two approaches are at play: quantified targets on the one hand, and the insularity of a small elite on the other. And the latter knows no gender, as evidenced by the F-35 and RUAG fiascos. Neither of these explanations excuses the other. The sole criterion should be competence. The real failures of the DDPS – the fraud, the tanks, the buried report – stem from a flawed chain of command, not from the gender of those within it.

The consequences, where there were any, remained minimal. In 2025, three directors were granted only a conditional discharge and did not stand for re-election. The minister, the Chief of the Armed Forces and the head of intelligence all left within a few weeks of one another, though none of these departures was officially linked to RUAG. No one was held publicly to account. In a small country, those who appoint, oversee and excuse are all too often one and the same.

Who authorised all this?

The Federal Council's response to all this rests on a distinction: the Neutrality Act, which it claims never to have breached, and the policy of neutrality, which it is free to adjust as it sees fit. This distinction is nothing but a ploy. What the great powers guaranteed in 1815 was perpetual neutrality, not a neutrality observed when it suits and suspended as soon as pressure from Brussels and Washington intensifies. A neutrality that a ministry can adjust is not perpetual. If a government considers that this commitment no longer serves the country's interests, the honest course of action is to say so and ask the people to release the country from it. No one has been willing to do so.

Meanwhile, the department has not been idle. It has sent troops to exercises in Poland and Bulgaria, adopted NATO interoperability standards and created a new State Secretariat for Security Policy. None of this has ever been put to a vote. Among the first countries Switzerland imposed sanctions on was the very one whose envoy had secured its neutrality.

There is one place where the department's thinking was set out in writing. In the summer of 2024, the FDFA drafted a direct counter-proposal to the initiative on neutrality. This was no mere formality. It retained perpetual and armed neutrality, upheld the renunciation of military alliances and the limitation on cooperation, and set aside only the provisions on sanctions. Both sides could have come to terms with this. Internal documents obtained by the Blick under the Freedom of Information Act show how the DDPS's own Secretariat for Security Policy reacted. It warned that the counter-proposal would mean "a clear change of course and a significant restriction on opportunities for cooperation". Ignazio Cassis prevailed in the Federal Council, whilst Guy Parmelin, a supporter of a counter-proposal, lost.

Read that again. A federal department opposed the enshrinement of armed neutrality in the Constitution, not because it would be illegal, imprudent or too costly, but because it would tie its hands.

Some of those familiar with the Department of Home Affairs go even further. In *Das NATO-Netzwerk in der Schweiz*, published in August 2026, Rafael Lutz quotes former Defence Minister Ueli Maurer, who speaks of a wave of purges. A former head of training at the intelligence service claims that many of his former colleagues are now prepared to sacrifice Switzerland for the sake of NATO integration. The DDPS denies any political filtering in promotions. It would do so in any case, and no document will likely ever prove the contrary.

The bill arrives

On the strength of this assessment, the Federal Council is demanding far more money. In its message of 12 August 2026, it requests 24 billion francs, entirely earmarked for armaments. As the debt brake prohibits ordinary borrowing, the government has turned to VAT. The draft put out for consultation provided for a 0.8-point increase over ten years. The final version proposes a 0.5-point increase over twelve years, with an armaments fund authorised to borrow up to 6 billion francs. The figure quoted is lower and the duration longer, but the mechanism remains the same: a consumption tax, paid on every purchase, regardless of the purchaser's income.

Opinion polls suggest that the public would reject it. The Centre supports the increase, whilst the PLR and the UDC oppose it. In September, the Council of States' Security Policy Committee rejected the government's proposal by eight votes to three. Together with the Finance Committee, it is now proposing to raise VAT by just 0.2 percentage points and to make up the shortfall through borrowing – up to 6 billion in the Finance Committee's version and up to 12 billion in the Security Policy Committee's version. The fund would also receive 500 million a year from unspent appropriations and would run until 2045.

Note that what nobody is contesting in this compromise is the fund itself. A VAT increase requires a constitutional amendment and will therefore automatically be put to a referendum, at the earliest in June 2027. The law on the fund, however, does not. It is an ordinary law, subject to a referendum only if 50,000 citizens collect signatures. And if the tax fails, reports the ATS, the fund remains. When the tax proved unpopular, the response was not to defend it, but to find ways round those who would have to pay it.

Two referendums, two responses

None of this means that Switzerland does not need an army. It needs an army that works.

Let's start with what costs nothing. Washington has shown on two occasions that it does not honour its own commitments. Let's suspend payments for the two US programmes. Let's demand prices and delivery dates in writing, within a set timeframe. If the Foreign Military Sales system cannot provide them, let Washington state this publicly, and let Parliament decide openly whether Switzerland still wishes to purchase under these conditions. This is the debate that nobody had in 2021.

Next comes the money. The answer is no, in all the forms proposed – whether through taxation, the budget or borrowing. A department that has been incapable for fifteen years of accounting for what it possesses, which Parliament has refused to scrutinise through a committee of inquiry, and whose new minister has not yet shown that he will challenge the system he has inherited, must not be given any more. No amount of money has ever solved a problem of this nature.

And on 27 September, vote 'yes'. Not because the initiative is skilfully drafted – for it is not – and the Federal Council is right to say that part of its content merely reiterates existing law. Vote 'yes' because the alternative leaves the matter where it has been for thirty years: within the department, decided by civil servants whom no one can dismiss. If Parliament wants a different answer later, it can come and ask for it.

As for the money, not a single franc more until the department has proved it can account for what it has. On neutrality, YES. What was guaranteed in Paris in 1815 must not be surrendered by Bern.

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