



Voice from Russia interviews Ambassador Sergei Garmonin

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After an initial personal meeting in March, Peter Hänseler conducts an interview with the Russian ambassador Sergei Garmonin - the questions are varied and topical.

Introduction

On March 22, 2024, an input event was held in Zurich-Kloten on the topic of "Russia/Switzerland/Neutrality". The event was attended by diplomat Jean-Daniel Ruch, Russian Ambassador Sergei Garmonin and Peter Hänseler.

Peter Hanseler spoke about Russia, the background to the Ukraine conflict and BRICS ([link](#)); the Russian ambassador on Swiss neutrality ([link](#)).

Dabei ergab sich die Möglichkeit eines persönlichen Gespräches zwischen Botschafter Garmonin und Peter Hänseler und daraus wiederum die Idee eines Interviews. Wir präsentieren unseren Lesern hier das Ergebnis dieses Austausches zweier Persönlichkeiten, die beide auf ihrem jeweiligen «Posten» das Ihrige dafür tun, einer weiteren Eskalation entgegenzuwirken.

The interview was conducted before the peace talks at Bürgenstock. In our opinion, Ambassador Garmonin's analysis is spot on. It confirms the predictability and consistency of Russian diplomacy.

Ambassador Garmonin's statements therefore do not need to be adjusted, even after President Putin's keynote speech on Russian foreign policy on 14 June 2024 and after the meeting in Bürgenstock.

Interview

Switzerland owes its neutrality above all to Russia, through the influence of Tsar Alexander I, who was very much in favor of Switzerland's neutrality status at the Congress of Vienna.

Is it correct to say that Russia had an exceptionally good and close relationship with Switzerland until 2022?

Ambassador Garmonin:

The history of relations between Russia and Switzerland goes back more than two centuries. Switzerland's neutral status has long been an important constant in our bilateral dialog. I would like to point out that communication between Moscow and Bern has not always been smooth.

There were ups and downs and even a break in diplomatic relations after the assassination of top Soviet diplomat Wazlaw Vorovsky in Lausanne in 1923. His murderer was acquitted by the jury, who were clearly influenced by the anti-Soviet information hysteria of the time. But in the present, our bilateral relations were mainly constructive until recently. We had very close bilateral contacts and good economic relations, which have unfortunately been discontinued on the initiative of the Swiss authorities.

Since 2022, Switzerland has consistently supported the anti-Russian line of the "collective West". From the outset, the Swiss Confederation has taken a strictly pro-Kiev stance, accepting all 13 packages of unlawful EU sanctions, unjustly freezing Russian assets and proactively promoting the idea of an international tribunal to convict the Russian leadership.

Question:

In früheren Zeiten legte die Schweiz grossen Wert darauf, als Schweiz wahrgenommen zu werden, mit eigener Politik und eigenen Werten und vor allem als neutraler Staat. Ein Resultat dieser eigenständigen Politik war unter anderem, dass sehr viele internationale Organisationen ihren Sitz in der Schweiz nahmen oder zumindest bedeutende Büros dort unterhalten, vom Roten Kreuz, über Sportverbände bis hin zur UNO.

Inzwischen hat man den Eindruck, dass Washington und Brüssel einen massgeblichen Einfluss auf das innen- und aussenpolitische Verhalten der Schweiz haben.

Wie sehen Sie das?

Ambassador Garmonin:

In fact, we are currently witnessing an increasingly clear and growing involvement of official Bern in the anti-Russian campaign of Washington and Brussels and, as a result, the complete loss of Switzerland's authority as an impartial international platform. Naturally, this is aggravating the already complicated bilateral relations and leaves no prospect of a qualitative improvement in the foreseeable future.

It is obvious that the Swiss Confederation's rapprochement with NATO, which some external and internal forces are vigorously pushing for, will neither benefit our bilateral relations nor Bern's attempts to position itself on the international stage as a "neutral" state and "honest broker".

Although Switzerland is not part of the European Union, its authorities unfortunately still act mainly with Brussels in mind. The economy and geographical proximity are likely to play a major role in this: The EU is Switzerland's largest trading partner, and the Swiss Confederation itself is surrounded on all sides by EU member states. It is not surprising, albeit regrettable, that Bern follows Brussels' policy on many issues, often to the detriment of its own national interests.

Question:

The diplomatic atmosphere between Russia and Switzerland can be described as icy. You have been ambassador to Switzerland for over 7 years. To what extent has your work as ambassador changed since 2022 and do you still consider Switzerland to be neutral?

Ambassador Garmonin:

In our view, Switzerland has lost its neutrality as of 2022. The Swiss Confederation has thus deprived itself of the opportunity to act as an impartial mediator. We have repeatedly communicated our position on this issue to our colleagues at the FDFA, including at a high level. On January 23, Foreign Minister Lavrov met with his Swiss counterpart Ignazio Cassis in New York at his request. During the meeting, the Russian minister made fundamental assessments of the state of Swiss "neutrality" and Bern's unquestioning support for the Kiev regime.

As far as the embassy's work after 2022 is concerned, we have managed to maintain the channels of communication with Bern. In this sense, the situation is much better than with some other Western countries. The embassy is in constant contact with the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. From time to time, we also meet with representatives of other departments of the Swiss Confederation.

At the same time, however, there were also certain losses: Bern deliberately froze the work of the previous political and economic formats of Russian-Swiss cooperation.

Question:

On April 11, 2024, the non-partisan initiative committee submitted its neutrality initiative. It will now be possible to vote on the initiative, which aims to enshrine neutrality more precisely in the Federal Constitution, in the near future.

This initiative is a clear sign that parts of the population do not support the abandonment of Switzerland's neutrality.

What do you think of the neutrality initiative?

Ambassador Garmonin:

It is not part of the rules of Russian diplomacy to comment on the internal politics of host countries. We strictly adhere to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states.

In general, however, I can say that the embassy is of course closely following the development of Switzerland's stance on the principle of neutrality, which is now being severely eroded. As we can see, we are not alone in our assessment of Bern's official foreign policy.

Question:

There is much talk about the aims of the Russian special operation and the basic opinion in the West is that President Putin is waging a war of expansion and, after Ukraine, is also targeting the Baltic states and Poland.

Russia emphasized that the goal was demilitarization and denazification. In the West, denazification in particular is spoken of almost derisively.

Can you briefly explain the objectives to our readers and the reasons behind them?

Ambassador Garmonin:

Lasting peace requires the unequivocal establishment of Ukraine's non-aligned status, the rejection of any NATO advance, the militarization of Ukraine as a threat to Russia and the Nazi policy of the legal and practical destruction of all Russian heritage on Ukrainian territory. It is also important to eradicate the weeds of neo-Nazism, which unfortunately are firmly rooted in the black soil of Ukraine.

It should be emphasized that neo-Nazism is not exclusively a problem of Ukraine; different countries are affected by this scourge to varying degrees. In the vast majority of countries, however, neo-Nazis are only a marginalized group. In Ukraine, on the other hand, former executioners and members of penal brigades who were officially sentenced as Nazi criminals are glorified as heroes. Streets are named after them and monuments are erected in their honor. A hate ideology is being built up on this basis. This is unacceptable. This is an issue of principle and it will be resolved.

Western pressure, sanctions and attempts to force Moscow to capitulate through a "peace conference" based on the Selensky peace formula will not change our approach, because Russia's fundamental interests are at stake.

In connection with the Russian goals, I would like to point out another point. Western politicians keep saying that they want to maximize the "price" of the conflict for Russia. In fact, they are only increasing Kiev's costs. Russia is ready to negotiate, but taking into account the interests of our national security and the current situation "on the ground". The longer Kiev delays the start of negotiations and the more Western long-range systems arrive in Ukraine, the further we will be forced to move the threat away from our borders. As for the claims that Mr. Putin is

allegedly targeting the Baltic states and Poland, I would like to point out that our President has repeatedly stressed that he has no such intentions. The last time he spoke about this was on June 5 at a meeting with representatives of foreign news agencies in St. Petersburg:

"They made up that Russia wants to attack NATO. Have they lost their minds or what?... Who made that up? That's nonsense, that's nonsense! It would be nonsense if it didn't serve to deceive your own population, to say: 'Terrible! Russia will soon attack us! And we urgently need to arm ourselves, urgently need to send weapons to Ukraine!' <...> We need to look at the core of current events. We have no imperial ambitions, believe me, this is all nonsense, just like Russia's threats against NATO and Europe."

Question:

Russia has the upper hand on the front and appears to be achieving its military goals, slowly but steadily at first and currently at an accelerated pace. Even the reporting in the West seems to be slowly adapting its opinion to the realities, but still believes that the tide could be turned once again with more arms deliveries.

How can Russia's military success be explained and why does Ukraine seem to be unsuccessful despite huge financial and military aid from NATO countries?

Ambassador Garmonin:

The face of modern warfare is changing rapidly. The key to success on the battlefield lies in the art of adapting to these changing conditions. No one is safe from mistakes, but the Russians are good at adapting - even in war.

As far as NATO's enormous financial and military aid is concerned, I admit that the Kiev leadership is not handling it in the way that the Brussels bureaucrats would like. We are quite happy with this situation.

Question:

Although the West has imposed over 17,000 sanctions against Russia, Russia is not only doing well, but better than all countries in the West. Russia's gross national product growth will exceed that of all G7 countries in 2024.

How can this be explained? What role does the military-industrial complex play in this? Is there a danger of Russia being rearmed to death, as was the case in the final years of the Soviet Union?

Ambassador Garmonin:

As I have already noted, the Russians are good at adapting. Practice clearly shows that this applies not only to military matters, but also to entirely peaceful areas: Economy, finance and macroeconomic stability. The West had hoped to destroy and isolate Russia with sanctions, but it has vastly overestimated its capabilities. Contrary to the opinion of Western journalists, the "world community" consists not only of the countries of the collective West, but also of the states that are friends of Russia and form the world majority.

As far as military spending is concerned, I would like to point out that Russia is drawing the consequences from its mistakes. The Russian government remembers very well the negative role that defence spending played for the Soviet Union. The President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, has repeatedly emphasised that we will not allow ourselves to be drawn into an arms race, which would be costly and destructive to our economy. He made the following statement at the plenary session of the International Economic Forum in St. Petersburg on 7 June 2024:

"Of course, we have to make sure that our military spending is in line with current needs and the level of development of our economy, because we must not parasitise anyone, as is the case in the United States, for example."

Question:

Russia has faced enormous challenges since the start of the special military operation, and we have already discussed some aspects of this above.

Anyone who follows the media in Russia can see that there is a spirit of optimism in the country. The special military operation in Ukraine is only part of this. There are significant changes in the economy and in social life.

What significance do education and culture have in today's changes, what role do Russian patriotism and family values play, perhaps also in comparison to how you perceive education, upbringing and culture in Switzerland and in the West?

Ambassador Garmonin:

The Western mainstream is trying to demonise Russia in every conceivable way, and we can see this very clearly in the Swiss media.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that modern Russia is a beacon of healthy conservatism and traditional values in modern Europe. Neoliberal values are alien to it and the institution of the family is important. The modern education and upbringing of Russian youth is a logical continuation of this state of affairs. Wars are not won by warlords, but by school teachers and priests.

When I talk about the education and upbringing of young people, I would like to address another topic to which I attach particular importance. It is about the memory and the truth about the Second World War. Russia's opponents are trying to rewrite the history of the twentieth century, including the history of the Second World War. Today, marches by former SS legionnaires or torchlight marches under the banners of the OUN-UPA (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists - Ukrainian Insurgent Army) are taking place in the Baltic States and Ukraine with the support of the official authorities. In the countries of Eastern Europe liberated from the Red Army, hundreds of monuments to Soviet soldiers are being destroyed. Therefore, it is our duty to pass on to our children and grandchildren the historical truth about the events of the Great Patriotic War and the role of the Red Army and the multinational Soviet people, who made a decisive contribution to the victory over Nazism, so that they can pass it on to their children and grandchildren.

Question:

Russia will not be attending the peace conference in Bürgenstock in June, or has not even been invited. It has now emerged that important representatives of the BRICS states China, Brazil and South Africa will also not be attending, although Switzerland has stated that the participation of the BRICS states is essential for the success of the conference.

How do you personally rate this peace conference?

Ambassador Garmonin:

The Bürgenstock Conference is a logical continuation of the meetings in the so-called "Copenhagen format", which have so far taken place at the lower level of national security advisors. The cornerstone of both the "Copenhagen format" and the future event in Switzerland is Selenski's so-called "peace formula". In essence, this is a series of ultimatums to Russia, which together represent a demand for capitulation: Reparations to Ukraine, annexation of a number of Russian regions by Ukraine, a tribunal against the Russian military and political leadership and so on.

The main motivation of the organisers of the Bürgenstock Conference is precisely to promote Selenski's "peace formula". We see that the Swiss authorities are now trying to disguise this fact by presenting the case that supposedly only three topics will be discussed at the conference. This is nothing more than a calculation to include as many countries of the Global South and East as possible in the event, otherwise the meeting will degenerate into another fruitless meeting of Western sponsors of the Kiev regime. The true purpose of the event is quite obvious to us. It is yet another attempt to impose a "peace formula" on Russia as a supposedly no-alternative solution to the situation in Ukraine, which is of course infinitely far removed from reality. In the opinion of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, holding the conference in Switzerland is a path to nowhere.

As with the meetings in the Copenhagen format, the organisers of this event will only seriously consider and promote the Russian ultimatum under the guise of a "peace formula". The outcome of the conference will be presented as a consensus that the Western countries will later try to impose on Russia as a "negotiating platform".

This approach is completely unworldly and cannot serve as a basis for negotiations. It is pointless to talk to Russia in the language of ultimatums. I see no point in taking part in events that propagate such a "formula" of the Kiev regime.

Question:

History teaches us that politicians repeatedly make mistakes that lead the world - or large parts of it - into military crises.

How do you assess the overall situation from a Russian perspective?

Ambassador Garmonin:

Unfortunately, Western diplomacy has lost its capacity for dialogue. Western capitals have now focused on "megaphone diplomacy", namely unfounded accusations, distortion of facts, insults, ultimatums and the categorical rejection of Russia's vital security interests.

The reason for this behaviour by Western foreign ministries is twofold. On the one hand, it is the desperate desire of the collective West to continue to dictate its will and vision to the countries of the world majority in the spirit of neo-colonialism on the core issues of international relations: what the world order should look like and according to which "rules" it should function. Secondly, it is the unwillingness of

the political elites to recognise objective reality: The balance of power has already changed, the world has already become multipolar, and the role of the collective West in international politics is shrinking and will continue to do so.

In psychology, there are five stages of accepting the inevitable: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. The West vacillates between denial and anger in its unwillingness to accept the inevitable, i.e. the transition to multipolarity and the end of its dominance. Hence the unwillingness to listen to points of view other than its own and the attempt to impose Selenski's "peace formula", which is completely out of touch with reality.

Question:

However, the world also teaches us that we should always look to the future with optimism despite all adversity.

How do you see the chances of normalising relations between the collective West and the Global South?

Ambassador Garmonin:

The collective West will not be able to ignore the new world situation forever; sooner or later, European and American politicians will have to recognise it. Then there will be a renaissance of diplomacy as the art of listening to each other and finding compromises, including in relations between Russia and the West. It is therefore too early to speak of the "death" of diplomacy. In the meantime, we Russian diplomats will continue to do our best to strengthen our country's political position in the new multipolar world we are witnessing.

Question:

Once again on the subject of the media: the West defines itself to a large extent through its "values", which are not described and defined anywhere in a generally binding manner. Nevertheless, freedom of opinion, diversity of opinion and freedom of the media play a dominant role in the description of what is supposed to make up the West.

How do you see freedom of opinion, diversity of opinion and the media in comparison between Russia and Switzerland (possibly as a representative of the West as a whole)?

Ambassador Garmonin:

I believe that there is a diversity of opinion in both Russia and Switzerland. In the West, people like to talk about "state" media in Russia. But in Russia there are also other, quite respectable media: for example Kommersant, Izvestia, Vedomosti or Moskovsky Komsomolets, which have private owners.

In Switzerland, for example, there is "Die Weltwoche", a good example of a solid media company with quality analyses, whose position differs greatly from that of the editorial offices of other publications.

Of course, each country has its own mainstream, and it is not surprising that it differs significantly between Russia and Switzerland: The different historical destinies of the two countries offer different perspectives on the judgement of certain events. In the case of the Swiss Confederation, the discourse of the overwhelming majority of local newspapers is entirely in line with the logic and worldview of Brussels and Washington. It is a pity that this mainstream dictates a format in which an uncomfortable opinion may simply not fit.

To be honest, we had to learn several times that our interviews and comments for the Swiss media were simply not published because the editor-in-chief had decided so. What is that if not censorship? This makes it all the more valuable for us to work with those Swiss journalists and newspapers that are prepared to give us the opportunity to present our position on various topics honestly and openly.

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