



Why Switzerland must tie its politicians' hands

On September 27, Swiss voters decide on neutrality. Officially taken for granted by all, it is in fact at the heart of a conflict between citizens and elites over the country's creeping subordination to NATO and the EU.

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Wed 16 Sep 2026 6 min read

On the 27th of September, Swiss voters will decide on the popular initiative “Safeguarding Swiss Neutrality.” The proposal would insert a new article into the Federal Constitution declaring Swiss neutrality perpetual and armed. Switzerland would be barred from joining any military or defence alliance and from cooperating with such alliances except in the event of a direct attack or imminent preparation for one. It would also prohibit participation in armed conflicts

between third countries and the imposition of sanctions on belligerent states, with narrow exceptions only for UN-mandated measures and steps to prevent circumvention of those sanctions. The country would instead leverage its neutrality for mediation and good offices.

This is not an abstract constitutional exercise or a merely bureaucratic formality. It is a direct response to the steady erosion of the principle that kept Switzerland out of both world wars and preserved its independence for two centuries. It is one of the core foundations the country was built on and one of the main reasons for its present success, the global trust it enjoys and its economic prowess.

Switzerland's neutrality has been mentioned in the Federal Constitution since 1848, yet the text has never supplied a detailed definition of what that neutrality actually requires. The practical meaning of the principle has therefore been left almost entirely to the Federal Council and the Parliament. This lack of constitutional clarity is precisely the problem. This principle is far too crucial to be left open to interpretation.

Opponents of the initiative insist Switzerland is already neutral and that the stricter wording is unnecessary. They warn it would isolate the country, damage relations with neighbors, and prevent useful security cooperation. Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis has argued that neutrality is not a dogma and that the government must retain discretion. The Federal Council and most parties reject the proposal without offering a counter-proposal, claiming the current approach has served Switzerland well and that the initiative's core demands are already met in practice. In other words, they claim that there is no need for this referendum at all, as Switzerland is already, famously, neutral.

However, if the nation's neutrality is already secure, why is there such fierce resistance to writing a clearer definition of it into the Constitution? The answer lies in the record of the last couple of decades. Switzerland joined NATO's "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) in 1996 and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council the following year. It has contributed to the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) since 1999 with the SWISSCOY contingent, and in June 2026 the parliament approved raising the maximum strength from 215 to as many as 300 personnel while extending the mission until 2029. The country also steadily aligned military standards with NATO norms. Post-2022, cooperation has deepened further under the Individually Tailored Partnership Programme, with objectives focused on dialogue, interoperability, and joint work in areas of common interest. Switzerland has also moved closer to the European Union on multiple fronts: Schengen membership, adoption of large swaths of EU law through bilateral agreements, free movement of

persons, and, most tellingly, the near-automatic alignment with EU sanctions packages, including those against Russia after the invasion of Ukraine. Since 2022, Moscow has made it clear that it no longer regards Switzerland as neutral.

None of this required a formal NATO membership application or an EU accession treaty. But neither of these things were actually needed, because incremental “cooperation” and “flexibility” achieved the same practical result. The political class treats neutrality as a useful brand for domestic consumption while at the same time it quietly adjusts it to the preferences of Brussels and the Atlantic alliance. It is also abundantly clear that this direction was already locked in at the institutional level from the August 2024 report of the official Security Policy Study Commission (Studienkommission Sicherheitspolitik), which recommended that cooperation with NATO and the EU should deliberately go beyond existing arrangements and aim at joint defence capability. Journalist Rafael Lutz later reported that the State Secretariat for Security Policy (SEPOS) had already concluded internally in 2024 that the initiative must be defeated at all costs, precisely because it would block further NATO integration.

When voters or critics object to this very clear trajectory, the response is rarely substantive. We clearly see this in the line of attack that the “No” camp has chosen to defeat the initiative: Instead of offering arguments to rationally lay out and support their position, ad-hominem attacks dominate their side of the conversation. A great deal of the opposition focuses on personal attacks against Christoph Blocher, the veteran SVP politician and main driving force behind the initiative, rather than on the substance of the text itself. Anyone favoring the stricter definition is painted as pro-Russian, a useful idiot for the Kremlin, or indifferent to Ukrainian suffering. Russian media interest in the initiative is cited as proof of foreign interference rather than evidence that the current policy direction has already compromised Switzerland’s credibility as a neutral actor.

The deeper issue is incentives. The permanent political and administrative class in Bern does not share the same interests as ordinary Swiss citizens. Many of them look longingly at the prestige, networks, and career opportunities that come with closer integration into European structures. Sitting in Brussels meetings, participating in high-level security forums, and being treated as a reliable partner by larger powers carries status that pure neutrality does not. For the citizen, neutrality has meant avoidance of foreign wars, preservation of sovereignty, and the ability to act as an honest broker.

In this light, the real question that this referendum will settle is who gets to define what neutrality means: the Constitution itself or whoever happens to be in power today and tomorrow? A constitution that leaves the definition of neutrality to the discretion of the very people who benefit from eroding it is an invitation to do so. The initiative's purpose is to remove that option. By locking the principle into clear constitutional language, it forces future governments to seek explicit public consent for any major departure. In a direct democracy, that is not "radical", as the initiative's opponents would have people believe. It is the exact opposite: It is the practical application of the system's own logic.

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Analysis Switzerland EU NATO